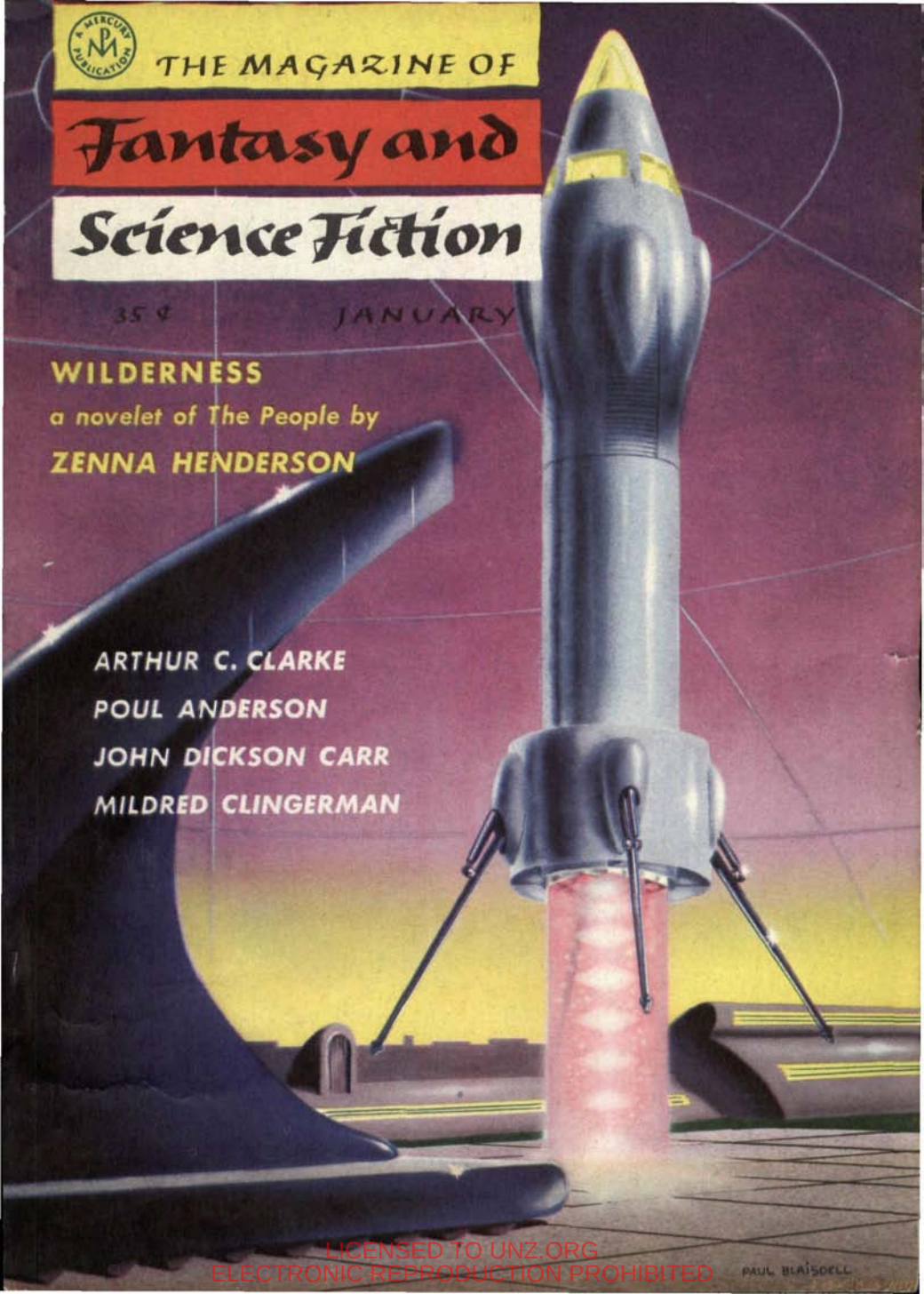

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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

VOLUME 12, No. 1 JANUARY

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(*On the planet of a double star beyond the Horse Head Nebula, an alien spaceship*)

Joseph W. Ferman, PUBLISHER *Anthony Boucher*, EDITOR

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"The People," P. Schuyler Miller wrote recently in Astounding, *"are by all odds the most appealing outworlders we've had"; and your letters in praise of* Ararat *(F&SF, October, 1952),* Gilead *(August, 1954) and* Pottage *(September, 1955) more than confirm his verdict. Here — completely understandable in itself, for those of you who have been luckless enough to miss the earlier stories — is the latest and longest novelet of The People . . . and in many respects the richest and most exciting.*

Wilderness

by ZENNA HENDERSON

"WELL, HOW DO YOU EXPECT BRUCE to concentrate on spelling when he's so worried about his daddy?" I thumbed through my second graders' art papers, hoping to find one lift out of the prosaic.

"Worried about his daddy?" Mrs. Kanz looked up from her spelling tests. "What makes you think he's worried about him?"

"Why he's practically sick for fear he won't come home this time." I turned the paper upside down and looked again. "I thought you knew everything about everyone," I teased. "You've briefed me real good in these last three weeks. I feel like a resident instead of a newcomer." I sighed and righted the paper. It was still a tree with six apples on it.

"But I certainly didn't know Stell and Mark were having trouble." Mrs. Kanz was chagrined.

"They had an awful fight the night before he left," I said. "Nearly scared the waddin' out of Bruce."

"How do you know?" Mrs. Kanz's eyes were suddenly sharp. "You haven't met Stell yet and Bruce hasn't said a word all week except yes and no."

I let my breath out slowly. *Oh no!* I thought. *Not already! Not already!*

"Oh, a little bird told me," I said lightly, busying myself with my papers to hide the small tremble of my hands.

"Little bird, toosh!" she said. "You probably heard it from Marie, though how she—"

"Could be," I said, "could be." I bundled up my papers hurriedly. "Oops! Recess is almost over. Gotta get down stairs before the thundering herd arrives."

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The sound of the old worn steps was hollow under my hurried feet, but not nearly so hollow as the feeling in my stomach.

Only three weeks and I had almost betrayed myself already. Why couldn't I *remember!* Besides, the child wasn't even in my room. I had no business knowing anything about him. Just because he had leaned so quietly, so long over his literature book last Monday—and I had only looked a little . . .

At the foot of the stairs, I was engulfed waist-deep in children sweeping in from the playground. Gratefully I let myself be swept with them into the classroom.

That afternoon I leaned with my back against the window sill and looked over my quiet class. Well, quiet insofar as moving around the room was concerned, but each child humming audibly or inaudibly with the untiring dynamos of the young—the mostly inarticulate thought patterns of happy children. All but Lucine, my twelve-year-old first grader, who hummed briefly to a stimulus and then clicked off, hummed again and clicked off. There was a short somewhere, and her flat empty eyes showed it.

I sighed and turned my back on the room, wandering my eyes up the steepness of Black Mesa as it towered above the school, trying to lose myself from apprehension, trying to forget why I had run away—nearly five hundred miles of it—trying to forget those things that tugged at my sanity, things that could tear me loose from reality and set me adrift . . . Adrift? Oh, glory! Set me free! Set me free! I hooked my pointer fingers through the old wire grating that protected the bottom of the window and tugged sharply. Old nails grated and old wire gave and I sneezed through the dry, acid bite of ancient dust.

I sat down at my desk and rummaged for a kleenex and sneezed again, trying to ignore, but knowing too well, the heavy nudge and tug inside me. That tiny near-betrayal had cracked my tight protective shell. All that I had packed away so resolutely was shouldering and elbowing its way—

I swept my children out of spelling into numbers so fast that Lucine poised precariously on the edge of tears until she clicked on again and murkily perceived where we had gone.

"Now, look, Petie," I said, trying again to find a way through his stubborn block against number words. "This is the picture of two, but this is the name of two. . . ."

After the school buses were gone, I scrambled and slid down the steep slope of the hill below the gaunt old schoolhouse and walked the railroad ties back towards the hotel-boardinghouse where I stayed. Eyes intent on my feet, but brightly conscious of the

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rails on either side, I counted my way through the clot of old buildings that was town, and out the other side. If I could keep something on my mind, I could keep ghosts out of my thoughts.

I stopped briefly at the hotel to leave my things and then pursued the single rail line on down the little valley, over the shaky old trestle that was never used any more, and left it at the tailings dump and started up the hill, enjoying fiercely the necessary lunge and pull, tug and climb, that stretched my muscles, quickened my heartbeat and pumped my breath up hard against the top of my throat.

Panting, I grabbed a manzanita bush and pulled myself up the last steep slope. I perched myself, knees to chest, on the crumbly outcropping of shale at the base of the huge brick chimney, arms embracing my legs, my cheek pressed to my knees. I sat with closed eyes, letting the late afternoon sun soak into me. If only this could be all, I thought wistfully. If only there were nothing but sitting in the sun, soaking up warmth. Just being, without questions. And for a long, blissful time, I let that be all.

But I couldn't put it off any longer. I felt the first slow trickling through the crack in my armor. I counted trees, I counted telephone poles, I said times tables until I found myself thinking six times nine is ninety-six and then I gave up and let the flood gates open wide.

It's always like this, one of me cried to the rest of me. *You promised! You promised and now you're giving in again—after all this time!*

I could promise not to breathe, too, I retorted.

But this is insanity—you know it is! Anyone knows it is!

Insane or not, it's me! I screamed silently. *It's me!* IT'S ME!

Stop your arguing, another of me said. *This is too serious for bickering. We've got problems.*

I took a dry manzanita twig and cleared a tiny space on the gravelly ground, scratching up an old square nail and a tiny bit of sun-purpled glass as I did so. Shifting the twig to my other hand, I picked up the nail and rubbed the dirt off with my thumb. It was pitted with rust, but still strong and heavy. I wondered what it had held together back in those days, and if the hand that last held it was dust now, and if whoever it was had had burdens—

I cast the twig from me with controlled violence and, rocking myself forward, I made a straight mark on the cleared ground with the nail. This was a drearily familiar inventory and I had taken it so many times before, trying to simplify this complicated problem of mine, that I fell automatically into the same old pattern.

Item one. Was I really insane—or going insane—or on the way to

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going insane? It must be so. Other people didn't see sounds. Nor taste colors. Nor feel the pulsing of other people's emotions like living things. Nor find the weight of flesh so like a galling straitjacket. Nor more than half believe that the burden was not lay-down-able short of death.

But then, I defended, I'm still functioning in society and I don't drool or foam at the mouth. I don't act very crazy and as long as I guard my tongue, I don't sound crazy.

I pondered the item a while, then scribbled out the mark. *I guess I'm still sane . . . so far.*

Item two. Then what's wrong with me? Do I just let my imagination run away with me? I jabbed holes all around my second heavy mark. No, it was something more, something beyond just imagination, something beyond—what?

I crossed that marking with another to make an X.

What shall I do about it then? Shall I fight it out like I did before? Shall I deny and deny and deny until . . . I felt a cold grue, remembering the blind panic that had finally sent me running until I ended up at Kruper, and all the laughter went out of me, clear to the bottom of my soul.

I crosshatched the two marks out of existence and hid my eyes against my knees again and waited for the sick up-gushing of apprehension to foam into despair over my head. Always it came to this. Do I *want* to do anything about it? Should I stop it all with an act of will? *Could* I stop it all by an act of will? Did I *want* to stop it?

I scrambled to my feet and scurried around the huge stack, looking for the entrance. My feet cried, *No no!* on the sliding gravel. Every panting breath cried *No no!* as I slipped and slithered around the steep hill. I ducked into the shadowy interior of the huge chimney and pressed myself against the blackened crumbling bricks, every tense muscle shouting *No no!* And in the wind-shuddery silence, I cried "No!" and heard it echo up through the blackness above me. Almost I could see the word shoot up through the pale elliptical disk of the sky at the top of the stack.

"Because I could!" I shrieked defiantly inside me. "If I weren't afraid, I could follow that word right on up and erupt into the sky like a Roman candle and never, never, never feel the weight of the world again!"

But the heavy drag of Reason grabbed my knees and elbows and rubbed my nose forcibly into Things As They Really Are and I sobbed impotently against the roughness of the curving wall. The sting of salty wetness across my cheek shocked me out of rebellion.

Crying? Wailing against a dirty old smelter wall because of a dream? Fine goings on for a responsible pedagogue!

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I scrubbed at my cheeks with a kleenex and smiled at the grime that came off. I'd best get back to the hotel and get my face washed before eating the inevitable garlicky supper I'd smelled on my way out.

I stumbled out into the red flood of sunset and down the thread of a path I had ignored when coming up. I hurried down into the duskiness of the cottonwood thicket along the creek at the bottom of the hill. Here, where no eyes could see, no tongues could clack at such undignified behavior, I broke into a run, a blind, headlong run, pretending that I could run away—just away! Maybe with salty enough tears and fast enough running, I could buy a dreamless night.

I rounded the turn where the pinky-gray granite boulder indented the path—and reeled under a sudden blow. I had run full tilt into someone. Quicker than I could focus my eyes, I was grabbed and set on my feet. Before I could see past a blur of tears from my smarting nose, I was alone in the dusk.

I mopped my nose tenderly. "Well," I said aloud. "That's one way to knock the nonsense out of me." Then immediately began to wonder if it was a sign of unbalance to talk aloud to yourself.

I looked back uphill when I came out of the shadow of the trees. The smelter stack was dark against the sky, massive above the remnants of the works. It was beautiful in a stark way and I paused to enjoy it briefly. Suddenly there was another darkness up there. Someone had rounded the stack and stood silhouetted against the lighter horizon.

I wondered if the sound of my sorrow was still echoing up the stack and then I turned shamefaced away. Whoever it was up there had more sense than to listen for the sounds of old sorrows.

That night, in spite of my outburst of the afternoon, I barely slipped under the thin skin of sleep, and, for endless ages, clutched hopelessly for something to pull me down into complete forgetfulness. Then despairingly I felt the familiar tug and pull and, hopelessly, eagerly, slipped headlong into my dream that I had managed to suppress for so long.

There are no words—there are no words anywhere for my dream. Only the up-welling of delight, the stretching of my soul, the boundless freedom, the warm belongingness. And I held the dearness close to me—oh, so close to me! knowing that awaking must come—

And it did, smashing me down, forcing me into flesh, binding me leadenly to the earth, squeezing out the delight, cramping my soul back into finiteness, snapping bars across my sky and stranding me in the thin watery glow of morning so alone again that the effort

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of opening my eyes was almost too much to be borne.

Lying rigidly under the press of the covers, I gathered up all the tatters of my dream and packed them tightly into a hard little knot way back in the back of my consciousness. *Stay there. Stay there,* I pleaded. *Oh stay there!*

Forcing myself to breakfast, I came warily into the dining room at the hotel. As the only female-type woman in the hotel, I was somewhat disconcerted to walk into the place when it was full and have every hand pause and every jaw still itself until I found my way to the only empty seat, and then to hear the concerted return to eating, as though on cue. But I was later this morning, and the place was nearly empty.

"How was the old stack?" Half of Marie's mouth grinned as she pushed a plate of hotcakes under my nose and let go of it six inches above the table. I controlled my wince as it crashed to the table, but I couldn't ignore completely the sooty thumb print etched in the grease on the rim. Marie took the stiffly filthy rag she had hanging as usual from her apron pocket and smeared the print around until I at least couldn't see the whorls and ridges any more.

"It was interesting," I said, not bothering to wonder how she knew I'd been there. "Kruper must have been quite a town when the smelter was going full blast."

"Long's I've been here, it's been dyin'," said Marie. "Been here thirty-five years next February and *I* ain't never been up to the stack. I ain't lost nothing up there!"

She laughed soundlessly but gustily. I held my breath until the garlic went by. "But I hear there's some girls that's gone up there and lost—"

"Marie!" Old Charlie bellowed from across the table. "Cut out the chatter and bring me some grub. If Teacher wants to climb *up* that da—dang stack, leave her be. Maybe she likes it!"

"Crazy way to waste time," muttered Marie, teetering out to the kitchen, balancing her gross body on impossibly spindly legs.

"Don't mind her," bellowed Old Charlie. "Only thing she thinks is fun is beer. Why, lots of people like to go look at worthless stuff like that. Take—well—take Lowmanigh here. He was up there only yesterday—"

"Yesterday?" My lifted brows underlined my question as I looked across the table. It was one of the fellows I hadn't noticed yet. His name had probably been thrown at me with the rest of them by Old Charlie on my first night there, but I had lost all the names except Old Charlie and Severeid Swanson, which was the name attached to a wavery, fragile-looking Mexicano with no English at all who seemed to subsist mostly on garlic and vino, and who al-

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ways blinked four times when I smiled at him.

"Yes." Lowmanigh looked across the table at me, no smile softening his single word. My heart caught as I saw across his cheek the familiar pale quietness of chill-of-soul. I knew the look well. It had been on my own face that morning before I made my truce with the day.

He must have read something in my eyes, because his face shuttered itself quickly into a noncommittal expression and, with a visible effort, he added, "I watched the sunset from there."

"Oh?" My hand went thoughtfully to my nose.

"Sunsets!" Marie was back with the semi-liquid she called coffee. "More crazy stuff. Why waste good time?"

"What do you spend your time on?" Lowmanigh's voice was very soft.

Marie's mind leaped like a startled bird. *Waiting to die!* it cried.

"Beer," she said, half of her face smiling. "Four beers equal one sunset." She dropped the coffeepot on the table and went back to the kitchen, leaving a clean, sharp, almost visible pain behind her as she went.

"You two oughta get together," boomed Old Charlie. "Liking the same things like you do. Low here knows more junk heaps and rubbish dumps than anybody else in the county. He collects ghost towns."

"I like ghost towns," I said to Charlie, trying to fill a vast conversational vacancy. "I have quite a collection of them myself."

"See, Low!" he boomed. "Here's your chance to squire a pretty schoolmarm around. Together, you two oughta be able to collect up a storm!" He choked on his pleasantry and his last gulp of coffee and left the room, whooping loudly into a blue bandana.

We were all alone in the big dining room. The early morning sun skidded across the polished hardwood floor, stumbled against the battered kitchen chairs, careened into the huge ornate mirror above the buffet and sprayed brightly from it over the cracked oilcloth table covering on the enormous oak table.

The silence grew and grew until I put my fork down, afraid to click it against my plate any more. I sat for half a minute, suspended in astonishment, feeling the deep throbbing of a pulse that slowly welled up into almost audibility, questioning *Together? Together? Together?* The beat broke on the sharp edge of a wave of desolation and I stumbled blindly out of the room.

"No!" I breathed as I leaned against the newel post at the bottom of the stairs. "Not involuntarily! Not so early in the day!"

With an effort, I pulled myself together. "Cut out this cotton-pickin' nonsense!" I told myself.

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"You're enough to drive anybody crazy!"

Resolutely I started up the steps, only to pause, foot suspended, halfway up. "That wasn't my desolation," I cried silently. "It was his!"

"How odd," I thought when I wakened at two o'clock in the morning, remembering the desolation.

"How odd!" I thought when I wakened at three, remembering the pulsing *Together?*

"How very odd," I thought when I wakened at seven and slid heavy-eyed out of bed—having forgotten completely what Lowmanigh looked like, but holding wonderingly in my consciousness a better-than-three-dimensional memory of him.

School kept me busy all the next week, busy enough that the old familiar ache was buried almost deep enough to forget it. The smoothness of the week was unruffled until Friday when the week's restlessness erupted on the playground twice. The first time I had to go out and peel Esperanza off Joseph and pry her fingers out of his hair so he could get his snub nose up out of the gravel. Esperanza had none of her Uncle Severeid's fragility and waveryness as she slapped the dust from her heavy dark braid of hair defiantly.

"He tells me Mexican!" she cried. "So what? I'm Mexican. I'm proud to be Mexican. I hit him some more if he calls me Mexican like a bad word again. I'm proud to be—"

"Of course you're proud," I said, helping her dust herself off. "God made us all. What do different names matter?"

"Joseph!" I startled him by swinging around to him suddenly. "Are you a girl?"

"Huh?" He blinked blankly with dusty lashes, then, indignantly: " 'Course not! I'm a boy!"

"Joseph's a boy! Joseph's a boy!" I taunted. Then I laughed. "See how silly that sounds? We are what we are. How silly to tease about something like that. Both of you go wash the dirt off." I spatted both of them off towards the schoolhouse and sighed as I watched them go.

The second time the calm was interrupted when the ancient malicious chanting sound of teasing pulled me out to the playground again.

"Lu-cine is crazy! Lu-cine is crazy! Lu-cine is crazy!"

The dancing, taunting group circled Lucine where she stood backed against the one drooping tree that still survived on our playground. Her eyes were flat and shallow above her gaping mouth, but smoky flames were beginning to flicker in the shallowness and her twelve-year-old muscles were tightening.

"Lucine!" I cried, fear winging my feet. "Lucine!"

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I sent me ahead of myself and caught at the ponderous, murderous, massiveness of her mind. Barely I slowed her until I could get to her.

"Stop it!" I shrieked at the children. "Get away, quick!"

My voice pierced through the mob-mind and the group dissolved into frightened individuals. I caught both of Lucine's hands and for a tense moment had them secure. Then she bellowed—a peculiarly animal-like bellow—and, with one flip of her arm, sent me flying.

In a wild flurry, I was swept up almost bodily, it seemed, into the irrational delirium of her anger and bewilderment. I was lost in the mazes of unreasoning thoughts and frightening dead ends and, to this day, I can't remember what happened physically.

When the red tide ebbed and the bleak gray click-off period came, I was hunched against the old tree with Lucine's head on my lap, her mouth lax and wet against my hand, her flooding, quiet tears staining my skirt, the length of her body very young and very tired.

Her lips moved.

"Ain't crazy."

"No," I said, smoothing her ruffled hair, wondering at the angry oozing scratch on the back of my hand. "No, Lucine. I know."

"He does, too," muttered Lucine. "He makes it almost straight, but it bends again."

"Oh?" I said soothingly, hunching my shoulder to cover its bareness with my torn blouse sleeve. "Who does?"

Her head tensed under my hand and her withdrawal was as tangible as the throb of a rabbit trying to escape restricting hands. "He said don't tell."

I let the pressure of my hand soothe her and I looked down at her ravaged face. *Me,* I thought. *Me with the outside peeled off. I'm crippled inside in my way as surely as she is in hers, only my crippling passes for normal. I wish I could click off sometimes and not dream of living without a limp —sweet impossible dream.*

There was a long moist intake of breath and Lucine sat up. She looked at me with her flat, incurious eyes.

"Your face is dirty," she said. "Teachers don't got dirty faces."

"That's right." I got up stiffly, shifting the zipper of my skirt around to the side where it belonged. "I'd better go wash. Here comes Mrs. Kanz."

Across the play field, the classes were lined up to go back inside. The usual scuffling horseplay was going on, but no one even bothered to glance our way. If they only knew, I thought, how close some of them had been to death—

"I been bad," whimpered Lucine. "I got in a fight again."

"Lucine, you bad girl!" cried Mrs. Kanz as soon as she got with-

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in earshot. "You've been fighting again. You go right in the office and sit there the rest of the day. Shame on you!"

And Lucine blubbered off towards the school building.

Mrs. Kanz looked me over. "Well," she laughed, apologetically, "I should have warned you about her. Just leave her alone when she gets in a rage. Don't try to stop her."

"But she was going to *kill* someone!" I cried, tasting again the blood lust, feeling the grate of broken bones.

"She's too slow," said Mrs. Kanz. "The kids always keep out of her way."

"But someday—"

Mrs. Kanz shrugged. "If she gets dangerous, she'll have to be put away."

"But why do you let the children tease her?" I protested, feeling a spasmodic gush of anger.

She looked at me sharply. "I don't 'let,'" she said. "Kids are always cruel to anyone who's different. Haven't you discovered that yet?"

"Yes, I have," I whispered. "Oh, yes, yes!" And huddled myself into myself against the creeping cold of memory.

"It isn't good, but it happens," she said. "You can't make everything right. You have to get calluses sometimes."

I brushed some of the dust off my clothes. "Yes," I sighed. "Calluses come in handy. But I still think something should be done for her."

"Don't say so out loud," warned Mrs. Kanz. "Her mother has almost beat her own brains out trying to find some way to help her. These things happen in the best of families. There's no help for them."

"Then who is—" I choked on my suppressed words, belatedly remembering Lucine's withdrawal.

"Who is who?" asked Mrs. Kanz over her shoulder as we went back to the schoolhouse.

"Who is going to take care of her all her life?" I asked lamely.

"Well! Talk about borrowing trouble!" Mrs. Kanz laughed. "Just forget about the whole thing. It's all in a day's work. It's a shame your pretty blouse had to get ruined though."

I was thinking of Lucine while I was taking off my torn blouse at home after school. I squinted tightly sideways, trying to glimpse the point of my shoulder to see if it looked as bruised as it felt, when my door was flung open and slammed shut and Lowmanigh was leaning against it, breathing heavily.

"Well!" I slid quickly into my clean shirt and buttoned it up briskly. "I didn't hear you knock. Would you like to go out and try it over again?"

"Did Lucine get hurt?" He

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pushed his hair back from his damp forehead. "Was it a bad spell? I thought I had it controlled—"

"If you want to talk about Lucine," I said out of my surprise, "I'll be out on the porch in a minute. Do you mind waiting out there? My ears are still burning from Marie's lecture to me on Proper Decorum for a Female in This Here Hotel."

"Oh." He looked around blankly. "Oh, sure—sure."

My door was easing shut before I knew he was gone. I tucked my shirttail in and ran my comb through my hair.

"Lowmanigh and Lucine?" I thought blankly. "What gives? Mrs. Kanz *must* be slipping. This she hasn't mentioned." I put the comb down slowly. "Oh. *'He makes it straight but it bends again.'* But how could that be?"

Low was perched on the railing of the sagging balcony porch that ran around two sides of the second story of the hotel. He didn't turn around as I creaked across the floor toward the dusty dilapidated wicker settle and chair that constituted the porch furniture.

"Who are you?" His voice was choked. "What are you doing here?"

Foreboding ran a thin cold finger across the back of my neck. "We were introduced," I said thinly. "I'm Perdita Verist, the new teacher, remember?"

He swung around abruptly. "Stop talking on top," he said. "I'm listening underneath. You know as well as I do that you can't run away—But how *do* you know? Who are you?"

"You stop it!" I cried. "You have no business listening underneath. Who are *you?"*

We stood there stiffly glaring at each other until with a simultaneous sigh we relaxed and sat down on the shaky wickerware. I clasped my hands loosely on my lap and felt the tight hard knot inside me begin to melt and untie until finally I was turning to Low and holding out my hand only to meet his as he reached for mine. Some one of me cried *My kind? My kind?* but another of me pushed the panic button.

"No," I cried, taking my hand back abruptly and standing up. "No!"

"No." Low's voice was soft and gentle. "It's no betrayal."

I swallowed hard and concentrated on watching Severeid Swanson tacking from one side of the road to the other on his way home to the hotel for his garlic, his two vino bottles doing very little to maintain his balance.

"Lucine," I said. "Lucine and you."

"Was it bad?" His voice was all on top now and my bones stopped throbbing to that other wave length.

"About par for the course according to Mrs. Kanz," I said shal-

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lowly. "I just tried to stop a buzz saw."

"Was it bad!" His voice spread clear across the band.

"Stay out!" I cried. "Stay out!"

But he was in there with me and I was Lucine and he was me and we held the red-and-black horror in our naked hands and stared it down. Together we ebbed back through the empty grayness until he was Lucine and I was me and I saw me inside Lucine and blushed for her passionately grateful love of me. Embarrassed, I suddenly found a way to shut him out and blinked at the drafty loneliness.

". . . and stay out!" I cried.

"That's right!" I jumped at Marie's indignant wheeze. "I seen him go in your room without knocking and Shut The Door!" Her voice was capitalized horror. "You done right chasing him out and giving him What For!"

My inner laughter slid the barrier open a crack to meet his amusement.

"Yes, Marie," I said soberly. "You warned me and I remembered."

"Well now, good!" Half of Marie's face smirked, gratified. "I knew you was a good girl. And Low, I'm plumb ashamed of you. I thought you was a cut above these gaw-danged muckers around here and here you go wolfing around in broad daylight!" She tripped off down the creaky hall, her voice floating back up the lovely, curved stairway. "In broad daylight! Supper'll be ready in two jerks of a dead lamb's tail. Git washed."

Low and I laughed together and went to "git washed."

I paused over a double handful of cold water I had scooped up from my huge china washbowl and watched it all trickle back as I glowed warmly with the realization that this was the first time in uncountable ages that I had laughed underneath. I looked long on my wavery reflection in the water. *And not alone,* one of me cried, erupting into astonishment, *not alone!*

The next morning I fled twenty-five miles into Town and stayed at a hotel that had running water —right in the house, and even a private bath! And reveled in the unaccustomed luxury, soaking Kruper out of me—at least all of it except the glitter bits of loveliness or funniness or niceness that remained on the riffles of my soul after the dust, dirt, inconvenience and ugliness sluiced away.

I was lying there drowsing Sunday afternoon, postponing until the last possible moment the gathering of myself together for the bus trip back to Kruper. Then suddenly, subtly, between one breath and the next, I was back into full wary armor, my attention twanged taut like a tightened wire and I sat up

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stiffly. Someone was here in the hotel. Had Low come into town? Was he here? I got up and finished dressing hastily. I sat quietly on the edge of the bed, conscious of the deep ebb and flow of Something. Finally I went down to the lobby. I stopped on the last step. Whatever it had been, it was gone. The lobby was just an ordinary lobby. Nowhere among the self-consciously Ranch Style furnishings was Low. But as I started toward the window to see again the lovely down-drop of the wooded canyon beyond the patio, he walked in.

"Were you here a minute ago?" I asked him without preliminaries.

"No," he said. "Why?"

"I thought—" I broke off. Then gears shifted subtly back to the commonplace and I said, "Well! What are you doing here?"

"Old Charlie said you were in Town and that I might as well pick you up and save you the bus trip back." He smiled faintly. "Marie wasn't quite sure I could be trusted after showing my true colors Friday, but she finally told me you were here at this hotel."

"But I didn't know myself where I was going to stay when I left Kruper!" I cried.

Low grinned engagingly. "My! You *are* new around here, aren't you? Are you ready to go?"

"I hope you're not in a hurry to get back to Kruper." Low shifted gears deftly as we nosed down to Lynx Hill bridge and then abruptly headed on up Lynx Hill at a perilous angle. "I have a stop to make."

I could feel his wary attention on me in spite of his absorption in the road.

"No," I said, sighing inwardly, visualizing long hours waiting while he leaned over the top fence rail exchanging long silences and succinct remarks with some mining acquaintance. "I'm in no hurry, just so I'm at school by nine in the morning."

"Fine." His voice was amused and, embarrassed, I tested again the barrier in my mind. It was still intact. "Matter-of-fact," he went on, "this will be one for your collection, too."

"My collection?" I echoed blankly.

"Your ghost town collection. I'm driving over to Machron—or where it used to be. It's up in a little box canyon above Bear Flat. It might be that it—" An intricate spot in the road—one small stone and a tiny pine branch—broke his sentence.

"Might be what?" I asked, deliberately holding onto the words he was trying to drop.

"Might be interesting to explore." Aware amusement curved his mouth slightly.

"I'd like to find an unbroken piece of sun glass," I said. "I have one old tumbler that's to-taste

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beautiful purple. It's in pretty good condition except that it has a piece out of the rim."

"I'll show you my collection some time," said Low. "You'll drool for sure."

"How come you like ghost towns?" I asked. "What draws you to them? History? Treasure? Morbid curiosity?"

"Treasure—history—morbid curiosity—" He tasted the words slowly and approved each with a nod of his head. "I guess all three. I'm questing."

"Questing?"

"Questing." The tone of his voice ended the conversation. With an effort I detatched myself from my completely illogical up-gush of anger at being shut out, and lost myself in the wooded wonder of the hillsides that finally narrowed the road until it was barely wide enough for the car to scrape through.

Finally Low spun the wheel, and, fanning sand out from our tires, came to a stop under a huge black walnut tree.

"Got your walking shoes on? This far and no farther for wheels."

Half an hour later we topped out on a small plateau above the rocky pass where our feet had slid and slithered on boulders grooved by high-wheeled ore wagons of half a century ago. The town had spread itself in its busiest days, up the slopes of the hills and along the dry creeks that spread fingerwise up from the small plateau. Concrete steps lead abortively up to crumbled foundations and sagging gates stood fenceless before shrub-shattered concrete walks.

There were a few buildings that were nearly intact, just stubbornly resisting dissolution. I had wandered up one faint street and down another before I realized that Low wasn't wandering with me. Knowing the solitary ways of ghost town devotees, I made no effort to locate him, but only wondered idly what he was questing for—carefully refraining from wondering again who he was and why he and I spoke together underneath like we did. But even unspoken, the wonder was burning deep under my superficial scratching among the junk heaps of this vanished town.

I found a white button with only three holes in it and the top of a doll's head with one eye still meltingly blue, and scrabbled, barehanded, with delight when I thought I'd found a whole sun-purpled sugar bowl . . . only to find it was just a handle and half a curve held in the silt.

I was muttering over a broken fingernail when a sudden soundless cry crushed into me and left me gasping with the unexpected force. I stumbled down the bank and ran clattering down the rock-strewn road. I found Low down by the old town dump, cradling something preciously in the bend of his arm.

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He lifted his eyes blindly to me.

"Maybe . . . !" he cried. "This might be some of it. It was never a part of this town's life. Look! Look at the shaping of it! Look at the flow of lines!" His hands drank in the smooth beauty of the metal fragment. "And if this is part of it, it might not be far from here that—" He broke off abruptly, his thumb stilling on the underside of the object. He turned it over and looked closely. Something died tragically as he looked. "General Electric," he said tonelessly. "Made in the USA." The piece of metal dropped from his stricken hands as he sagged to the ground. His fist pounded on the gravelly silt. "Dead end! Dead end! Dead—"

I caught his hands in mine and brushed the gravel off, pressing kleenex to the ooze of blood below his little finger.

"What have you lost?" I asked softly.

"Myself," he whispered. "I'm lost and I can't find my way back."

He took no notice of our getting up and my leading him to the fragment of a wall that kept a stunted elderberry from falling into the canyon. We sat down and, for a while, tossed on the ocean of his desolation as I thought dimly, *Too. Lost, too. Both of us.* Then I helped him channel into speech, though I don't know whether it was vocal or not.

"I was so little then," he said. "I was only three, I guess. How long can you live on a three-year-old's memories? Mom told me all they knew, but I could remember more. There was a wreck—a head-on collision the other side of Chuckawalla. My people were killed. The car tried to fly just before they hit. I remember Father lifted it up, trying to clear the other car, and Mother grabbed a handful of sun and platted me out of danger, but the crash came and I could only hear Mother's cry, 'don't forget! Go back to the Canyon,' and Father's 'Remember! Remember the Home!' and they were gone, even their bodies, in the fire that followed. Their bodies and every identification. Mom and Dad took me in and raised me like their own, but I've got to go back. I've got to go back to the Canyon. I belong there."

"What canyon?" I asked.

"What canyon?" he asked dully. "The Canyon where The People live now—my People. The Canyon where they located after the starship crashed. The starship I've been questing for, praying I might find some little piece of it to point me the way to the Canyon. At least to the part of the state it's in. The Canyon I went to sleep in before I woke at the crash. The Canyon I can't find because I have no memory of the road there.

"But *you* know! You surely must know! You aren't like the others. You're one of Us. You must be!"

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I shrank down into myself.

"I'm nobody," I said. "I'm not one of anybody. My Mom and Dad can tell me my grandparents and great-grandparents and great-great-grandparents, and they used to all the time, trying to figure out why they were burdened with such a child, until I got smart enough to get 'normal.'

"You think *you're* lost! At least you know what you're lost from. You could get un-lost. But I can't. I haven't *ever* been un-lost!"

"But you can talk underneath." He blinked before my violence. "You showed me Lucine—"

"Yes," I said recklessly. "And look at this!"

A rock up on the hillside suddenly spurted to life. It plowed down the slope, sending gravel flying, and smashed itself to powder against a boulder at the base.

"And I never tried this before, but look!"

I stepped up onto the crumbling wall and walked away from Low, straight on out over the canyon, feeling earth fall away beneath my feet, feeling the soft cradling sweep of the wind, the upness and outness and unrestrainedness. I cried out, lifting my arms, reaching ecstatically for the hem of my dream of freedom. One minute, one minute more and I could slide out of myself and never, never, *never*—

And then—

Low caught me just before I speared myself on the gaunt stubby pines below us in the canyon. He lifted me, struggling and protesting, back up through the fragile emptiness of air, back to the stunted elderberry tree.

"But I did! I did!" I sobbed against him. "I didn't just fall. For a while I really *did!*"

"For a while you really did, Dita," he murmured as to a child. "As good as I could do myself. So you do have some of the Persuasions. Where did you get them if you aren't one of Us?"

My sobs cut off without an after-echo, though my tears continued. I looked deep into Low's eyes, fighting against the anger that burned at this persistent returning to the wary, hurting place inside me. He looked steadily back until my tears stopped and I finally managed a ghost of a smile. "I don't know what a Persuasion is, but I probably got it the same place *you* got that tilt to your eyebrows."

He reddened and stepped back from me.

"We'd better start back. It's not smart to get night-caught on these back roads."

We started back along the trail.

"Of course you'll fill in the vacancies for me as we go back," I said, barely catching myself as my feet slithered on a slick hump of granite. I felt his immediate protest. "You've got to," I said, pausing to shake the gravel out of one shoe. "You can't expect me to ignore today, especially since I've

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found someone as crazy as I am."

"You won't believe—" He dodged a huge buckbrush that crowded the narrow road.

"I've had to believe things about myself all these years that I couldn't believe," I said, "And it's easier to believe things about other people."

So we drove through the magic of an early twilight that deepened into a star-brilliant night and I watched the flick of the stars through the overarching trees along the road and listened to Low's story. He stripped it down to its bare bones, but underneath, the bones burned like fire in the telling.

"We came from some other world," he said, wistful pride at belonging showing in his *we*. "The Home was destroyed. We looked for a refuge and found this earth. Our ships crashed or burned before they could land. But some of us escaped in life ships. My grandparents were with the original Group that gathered at the Canyon. But we were all there, too, because our memories are joined continuously back into the Bright Beginning. That's why I know about my People. Only I can't remember where the Canyon is, because I was asleep the one time we left it, and Mother and Father couldn't tell me in that split second before the crash.

"I've got to find the Canyon again. I can't go on living forever limping." He didn't notice my start at his echoing of that thought of mine when I was with Lucine. "I can't achieve any stature at all until I am with my People.

"I don't even know the name of the Canyon, but I do remember that our ship crashed in the hills and I'm always hoping that someday I'll find some evidence of it in one of these old ghost towns. It was before the turn of the century that we came, and somewhere, somewhere, there must be some evidence of the ship still in existence."

His was a well-grooved story too, worn into commonplace by repetition as mine had been—lonely, aching repetition to himself. I wondered for a moment, in the face of his unhappiness, why I should feel a stirring of pleased comfort, until I realized that it was because between us there was no need for murmurs of sympathy or trite little social sayings or even explanations. The surface words were the least of our communication.

"You aren't surprised?" He sounded almost disappointed.

"That you are an out-worlder?" I asked. I smiled. "Well, I never met one before, and I find it interesting. I only wish I could have dreamed up a fantasy like that to explain me to me. It's quite a switch on the old 'I *must* be adopted, because I'm so different.' But—"

I stiffened as Low's surge of rage caught me offguard.

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"Fantasy! I am adopted. I remember! I thought you'd know. I thought since you surely must be one of Us that you'd be—"

"I'm not one of you!" I flared. "Whatever 'you' are. I'm of earth—so much so that it's a wonder the dust doesn't puff out of my mouth when I speak—but at least I don't try to kid myself that I'm normal by *any* standard, earth-type or otherwise."

For a hostile minute we were braced stonily against one another. My teeth ached as the muscles on my jaws knotted. Then Low sighed and reaching out a finger, he traced the line of my face from brow to chin to brow again.

"Think your way," he said. "You've probably been through enough bad times to make anyone want to forget. Maybe someday you'll remember that you *are* one of Us and then—"

"Maybe, maybe, maybe!" I said through my weary shaken breath. "But I can't any more. It's too much for one day." I slammed all the doors I could reach and shoved my everyday self up to the front. As we started off, I reopened one door far enough to ask, "What's this between you and Lucine? Are you a friend of the family or something that you're working with her?"

"I know the family casually," said Low. "They don't know about Lucine and me. She caught my imagination once last year when I was passing the school. The kids were pestering her. I never felt such heart-broken bewilderment in all my life. Poor little earth kid. She's a three-year-old in a twelve-year-old body—"

"Four-year-old," I murmured. "Or almost five. She's learning a little."

"Four or five," said Low. "It must be awful to be trapped in a body—"

"Yes," I sighed. "To be shut in the prison of yourself."

Tangibly I felt again the warm running of his finger around my face, softly, comfortingly, though he made no move toward me. I turned away from him in the dusk to hide the sudden tears that came.

It was late when we got home. There were still lights in the bars and a house or two when we pulled into Kruper, but the hotel was dark and, in the pause after the car stopped, I could hear the faint creaking of the sagging front gate as it swung in the wind. We got out of the car quietly, whispering under the spell of the silence, and tiptoed up to the gate. As usual, the scraggly rosebush that drooped from the fence snagged my hair as I went through and, as Low helped free me, we got started giggling. I suppose neither of us had felt young and foolish for so long, and we had both unburdened ourselves of bitter tensions, and found tacit approval of us as the world refused to accept

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us and as we most wanted to be, and, having at least glimpsed a kindred soul, well, we suddenly bubbled over. We stood beneath the upstairs porch and tried to muffle our giggles.

"People *will* think we're crazy if they hear us carrying on like this," I choked.

"I've got news for you," said Low, close to my ear. "We *are* crazy. And I dare you to prove it."

"Hoh! As though it needed any proof!"

"I dare you." His laughter tickled my cheek.

"How?" I breathed defiantly.

"Let's not go up the stairs," he hissed. "Let's lift through the air. Why waste the energy when we can—"

He held out his hand to me. Suddenly sober, I took it and we stepped back to the gate and stood hand in hand, looking up.

"Ready?" he whispered, and I felt him tug me upward.

I lifted into the air after him, holding all my possible fear clenched in my other hand.

And the rosebush reached up and snagged my hair.

"Wait!" I whispered, laughter trembling again. "I'm caught."

"Earthbound!" he chuckled as he tugged at the clinging strands.

"Smile when you say that, podner," I returned, feeling my heart melt with pleasure that I had arrived at a point where I could joke about such a bitterness—and trying to ignore the fact that my feet were treading nothing but air. My hair freed, he lifted me up to him. I think our lips only brushed, but we overshot the porch and had to come back down to land on it. Low steadied me as we stepped across the railing.

"We did it," he whispered.

"Yes," I breathed. "We did."

Then we both froze. Someone was coming into the yard. Someone who stumbled and wavered and smashed glassily against the gatepost.

"¡Ay! ¡Ay! ¡Madre mía!" Severeid Swanson fell to his knees beside the smashed bottle. *"¡Ay, virgen purísima!"*

"Did he see us?" I whispered on an indrawn breath.

"I doubt it." His words were warm along my cheek. "He hasn't seen anything outside himself for years."

"Watch out for the chair." We groped through the darkness into the upper hall. A feeble 15-watt bulb glimmered on the steady drip of water splashing down into the sagging sink from the worn faucets that blinked yellow through the worn chrome. By virtue of these two leaky outlets, we had bathing facilities on the second floor.

Our goodnights were subvocal and quick.

I was in my nightgown and robe, sitting on the edge of my bed, brushing my hair when I heard a

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shuffle and a mutter outside my door. I checked the latch to be sure it was fastened and brushed on. There was a thud and a muffled rapping and my doorknob turned.

"Teesher!" It was a cautious voice. "Teesher!"

Who on earth! I thought and went to the door. "Yes?" I leaned against the peeling panel.

"Lat—me—een." The words were laborious and spaced.

"What do you want?"

"To talk weeth you, Teesher."

Filled with astonished wonder, I opened the door. There was Severeid Swanson swaying in the hall! But they had told me he had no English. . . . He leaned precariously forward, his face glowing in the light, years younger than I'd ever seen him.

"My bottle is broken. You have done eet. It is not good to fly without the wings. *Los ángeles santos, sí, pero* not the lovers to fly to kiss. It makes me drop my bottle. On the ground is spilled all the dreams."

He swayed backward and wiped the earnest sweat from his forehead. "It is not good. I tell you this because you have light in the face. You are good to my Esperanza. You have dreams that are not in the bottle. You have smiles and not laughing for the lost ones. But you must not fly. It is not good. My bottle is broken."

"I'm sorry," I said through my astonishment. "I'll buy you another."

"No," said Severeid. "Last time they tell me this too, but I cannot drink it because of the wondering. Last time, like birds, all, all in the sky—over the hills—the kind ones. The ones who also have no laughter for the lost."

"Last time?" I grabbed his swaying arm and pulled him into the room, shutting the door, excitement tingling along the insides of my elbows.

"Where? When? Who was flying?"

He blinked owlishly at me, the tip of his tongue moistening his dry lips.

"It is not good to fly without wings," he repeated.

"Yes, yes, I know," I said. "Where did you see the others fly without wings? I must find them —I must!"

"Like birds," he said, swaying. "Over the hills."

"Please," I said, groping wildly for what little Spanish I possessed. "I work there a long time. I don't see them no more. I drink some more. Chinee Joe give me new bottle."

"Por favor, señor," I cried, *"dónde—dónde . . . ?"*

All the light went out of his face. His mouth slackened. Dead eyes peered from under lowered lids.

"No comprendo." He looked around, dazed. *"Buenas noches, señorita."* He backed out of the

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door and closed it softly behind him.

"But—!" I cried to the door. "But please!"

Then I huddled on my bed and hugged this incredible piece of information to me.

Others! Flying over the hills! All, all in the sky! Maybe, oh maybe one of them was at the hotel in Town. Maybe they're not too far away. If only we knew . . . !

Then I felt the sudden yawning of a terrifying chasm. If it were true, if Severeid had really seen others lifting like birds over the hills, then Low was right—there *were* others! There *must* be a Canyon, a starship, a Home. But where did that leave me? I shrank away from the possibilities. I turned and buried my face in my pillow. But Mother and Dad! And Granpa Josh and Gramma Malvina and Greatgranpa Benedaly and—I clutched at the memories of all the family stories I'd heard. Crossing the ocean in steerage. Starting a new land. Why, my ancestors were as solid as a rock wall back of me, as far back as—as *Adam,* almost. I leaned against the certainty and cried out to feel the stone wall waver and become a curtain stirring in the winds of doubt.

"No, *no!*" I sobbed, and for the first time in my life I cried for my mother, feeling as bereft as though she had died.

Then I suddenly sat up in bed. "It might not be so!" I cried. "He's just a drunken wino. No telling what he might conjure out of his bottle. It might not be so!"

But it might, one of me whispered maliciously. *It might!*

The days that followed were mostly uneventful. I had topped out onto a placid plateau in my battle with myself, perhaps because I had something new to occupy my mind or perhaps it was just a slack place since any emotion has to rest sometime.

However, the wonder of finding Low was slow to ebb. I could sense his *good morning* with my first step down the stairs each day, and occasionally roused in the darkness to his silent *goodnight.*

Once after supper, Marie planted herself solidly in front of me as I rose to leave. Silently she pointed at my plate where I had apparently made mud pies of my food. I flushed.

"No good?" she asked, crossing her wrists over the grossness of her stomach and teetering perilously backward.

"It's fine, Marie," I managed. "I'm just not hungry." And I escaped through the garlicky cloud of her indignant exhalation and the underneath amusement of Low. How could I tell Marie that Low had been showing me a double rainbow he had seen that afternoon and that I had been so engrossed in the taste of the colors and the

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miracle of being able to receive them from him that I had forgotten to eat?

Low and I spent much time together, getting acquainted, but during most of it we were ostensibly sitting with the others on the porch in the twilight, listening to the old mining and cattle stories that were the well-worn coins that slipped from hand to hand wherever the citizens of Kruper gathered together. A good story never wore out; so after a while it was an easy matter to follow the familiar repetitions and still be alone together in the group.

Don't you think you need a little more practice in lifting? Low's question was a thin clarity behind the rumble of voices.

Lifting? I stirred in my chair, not quite as adept as he at carrying two threads simultaneously.

Flying, he said with exaggerated patience. *Like you did over the canyon and up to the porch.*

Oh. Ecstacy and terror puddled together inside me. Then I felt myself relaxing in the strong warmth of Low's arms instead of fighting them as I had when he had caught me over the canyon.

Oh, I don't know, I answered, quickly shutting him out as much as I could. *I think I can do it OK.*

A little more practice won't hurt. There was laughter in his reply. *But you'd better wait until I'm around—just in case.*

Oh? I asked. *Look.* I lifted in the darkness until I sat gently about six inches above my chair. *So!*

Something prodded me gently and I started to drift across the porch. Hastily I dropped back, just barely landing on the forward edge of my chair, my heels thudding audibly on the floor. The current story broke off in mid-episode and everyone looked at me.

"Mosquitoes," I improvised. "I'm allergic to them."

That's not fair! I sputtered to Low. *You cheat!*

All's fair—he answered, then shut hastily as he remembered the rest of the quotation.

Hmm! I thought. *Hmm! And this is war?* And felt pleased all out of proportion the rest of the evening.

Then there was the Saturday when the sky was so tangily blue and the clouds so puffily light that I just couldn't stay indoors scrubbing clothes and sewing on buttons and trying to decide whether to repair my nail polish or take it all off and start from scratch again. I scrambled into my saddle shoes and denim skirt, turned back the sleeves of my plaid shirt, tied the sleeves of my sweater around my waist and headed for the hills. This was the day to follow the town water pipe up to the spring that fed it and see if all the gruesome stories I'd heard about its condition were true.

I paused, panting, atop the last steep ledge above the town and

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looked back at the tumbled group of weathered houses that made up this side of Kruper. Beyond the railroad track there was enough flat land to make room for the four new houses that had been built when the Golden Turkey mine reopened. They sat in a neat row, bright as toy blocks against the tawny red of the hillside.

I brushed my hair back from my hot forehead and turned my back on Kruper. Scattered at haphazard intervals up among the hills I could see sections of the town water pipe stilted up sometimes on timbers to cross from one rise to another, other places followed the jagged contour of the slopes. A few minutes and sections later, I was amusing myself trying to stop with my hands the spray of water from one of the numerous holes in one section of the rusty old pipe and counting the hand-whittled wooden plugs that stopped up others. It looked a miracle that any water at all got down to town. I was so engrossed that I unconsciously put my hand up to my face when a warm finger began to trace—

"Low!" I whirled on him. "What are you doing up here?"

He slid down from a boulder above the line.

"Johnny's feeling porely today," he said. "He wanted me to check to see if any of the plugs had fallen out."

We both laughed as we looked up-line and traced the pipe by the white gush of spray and the vigorous greenness that utilized the spilling water.

"I'll bet he has at least a thousand plugs hammered in," said Low.

"Why on earth doesn't he get some new pipe?" I asked.

"Family heirlooms," said Low, whittling vigorously. "It's only because he's feeling so porely that he even entertains the thought of letting me plug his line. All the rest of the plugs are family affairs. About three generations worth."

He hammered the plug into the largest of the holes and stepped back, reaming the water from his face where it had squirted him.

"Come on up. I'll show you the spring."

We sat in the damp coolness of the thicket of trees that screened the cave where the spring churned and gurgled, blue and white and pale green before it lost itself in the battered old pipes. We were sitting on opposite sides of the pipe, resting ourselves in the consciousness of each other, when all at once, for a precious minute, we flowed together like coalescing streams of water, so completely one that the following rebound to separateness came as a shock. Such sweetness without even touching one another . . . ?

Anyway, we both turned hastily away from this frightening new emotion and, finding no words

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handy, Low brought me down a flower from the ledge above us, nipping a drooping leaf off it as it passed him.

"Thanks," I said, smelling of it and sneezing vigorously. "I wish I could do that."

"Well, you can!" said Low. "You lifted that rock at Macron and you can lift yourself."

"Yes, myself," I shivered at the recollection. "But not the rock. I could only move it."

"Try that one over there." Low lobbed a pebble towards a small slaty blue rock lying on the damp sand. Obligingly it plowed a small furrow up to Low's feet.

"*Lift* it," he said.

"I can't," I replied. "I told you I can't lift anything clear of the ground. I can just move it." I slid one of Low's feet to one side.

Startled, he pulled it back.

"But you *have* to be able to lift, Dita," he said. "You're one of—"

"I am not!" I threw the flower I'd been twiddling with down violently into the spring and saw it sucked into the pipe. Someone downstream was going to be surprised at the sink or else one of the thousands of fountains between here and town was going to blossom.

"But all you have to do is—is—" Low groped for words.

"Yes?" I leaned forward eagerly. Maybe I could learn . . .

"Well, just *lift!*"

"Twirtle!" I said, disappointed. "Anyway, can you do *this?* Look." I reached in my pocket and pulled out two bobbie pins and three fingernails full of pocket fluff. "Have you got a dime?"

"Sure." He fished it out and brought it to me. I handed it back. "Glow it." I said.

"Glow it? You mean blow it?" He turned it over in his hand.

"No, *glow* it. Go on. It's easy. All you have to do is glow it. Any metal will do but silver works better."

"Never heard of it," he said, frowning suspiciously.

"You must have," I cried, "if you are part of Me. If we're linked back to the Bright Beginning, you must remember!"

Low turned the dime slowly. "It's a joke to you," he said. "Something to laugh at."

"A joke!" I moved closer to him and looked up into his face. "Haven't I been looking for an answer long enough? Wouldn't I belong if I could? Would my heart break and bleed everytime I have to say *no* if I could mend it by saying *yes?* If I could only hold out my hands and say *I belong . . .*" I turned away from him, blinking. "Here," I sniffed. "Give me the dime."

I took it from his quiet fingers and, sitting down again, spun it quickly in the palm of my hand. It caught light immediately, glowing stronger and stronger until I slitted my eyes to look at it and

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finally had to close my fingers around its cool pulsing.

"Here." I held my hand out to Low, my bones shining pinkly through. "It's glowed."

"Light," he breathed, taking the dime wonderingly. "Cold light! How long can you hold it?"

"I don't have to hold it," I said. "It'll glow until I damp it."

"How long?"

"How long does it take metal to turn to dust?" I shrugged. "I don't know. Do your People know how to glow?"

"No." His eyes stilled on my face. "I have no memory of it."

"So I *don't* belong." I tried to say it lightly above the wrenching of my heart. "It almost looks like we're simultaneous, but we aren't. You came one way. I came t'other." *Not even to him!* I cried inside. *I can't even belong to him!* I drew a deep breath and put emotion to one side.

"Look," I said. "Neither of us fits a pattern. You deviate and I deviate and you're satisfied with your explanation of why you are what you are. I haven't found my explanation yet. Can't we let it go at that?"

Low grabbed my shoulders, the dime arching down into the spring. He shook me with a tight controlled shaking that was hardly larger than a trembling of his tensed hands. "I tell you, Dita, I'm not making up stories! I belong and you belong and all your denying won't change it. We are the same—"

We stared stubbornly at each other for a long moment, then the tenseness ran out of his fingers and he let them slide down my arms to my hands. We turned away from the spring and started silently, hand in hand, down the trail. I looked back and saw the glow of the dime and damped it.

No, I said to myself. *It isn't so. I'd know it if it were true. We* aren't *the same. But what am I then? What am I? And I* stumbled a little wearily on the narrow path.

During this time everything at school was placid and Pete had finally decided that *two* could have a name *and* a picture and learned his number words to ten in one day.

And Lucine—symbol to Low and me of our own imprisonment—with our help was blossoming under the delight of reading her second pre-primer.

But I remember the last quiet day. I sat at my desk checking the tenth letter I'd received in answer to my inquiries concerning a possible Chinee Joe and sadly chalking up another *no.* So far I had been able to conceal from Low the amazing episode of Severeid Swanson. I wanted to give him back his Canyon myself, if it existed. I wanted it to be my gift to him—and to my own shaken self. Most

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of all I wanted to be able to know at least one thing for sure, even if that one thing proved me wrong or even parted Low and me. Just one solid surety in the whole business would be a comfort and a starting place for us truly to get together.

I wished frequently that I could take hold of Severeid bodily and shake more information out of him, but he had disappeared—walked off from his job without even drawing his last check. No one knew where he had gone. The last Kruper had seen of him was early the next morning after he had spoken with me. He had been standing, slack-kneed and wavering, a bottle in each hand, at the crossroads—not even bothering to thumb a ride, just waiting blankly for someone to stop for him—and apparently someone had.

I asked Esperanza about him and she twisted her thick shining braid of hair around her hand twice and tugged at it.

"He's a wino," she said dispassionately. "They ain't smart. Maybe he got losted." Her eyes brightened. "Last year he got losted and the cops picked him up in El Paso. He brang me some perfume when he came back. Maybe he went to El Paso again. It was pretty perfume." She started down the stairs. "He'll be back," she called, "Unless he's dead in a ditch somewhere."

I shook my head and smiled ruefully. And she'd fight like a wildcat if anyone else talked about Severeid like that. . . .

I sighed at the recollection and went back to my disappointing letter. Suddenly I frowned and moved uneasily in my chair. What was wrong? I felt acutely uncomfortable. Quickly I checked me over physically. Then my eyes scanned the room. Petie was being jet planes while he drew pictures of them and the soft *skoosh! skoosh! skoosh!* of the takeoffs was about the only on-top sound in the room. I checked underneath and the placid droning hum was as usual. I had gone back on top when I suddenly dived back again. There was a sharp, stinging buzz like an angry bee—a malicious, angry buzz! Who was it? I met Lucine's smoldering eyes and I knew.

I almost gasped under the sudden flood of hate-filled anger. And when I tried to reach her, down under, I was rebuffed—not knowingly, but as though there had never been a contact between us. I wiped my trembling hands against my skirt, trying to clean them of what I had read.

The recess bell came so shatteringly that I jumped convulsively and shared the children's laughter over it. As soon as I could, I hurried to Mrs. Kanz's room.

"Lucine's going to have another spell," I said without preface.

"What makes you think so?" Mrs. Kanz marked 46½% on the top of a literature paper.

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"I don't think so, I know so," I said. "And this time she won't be too slow. Someone will get hurt if we don't do something."

Mrs. Kanz laid down her pencil and folded her arms on the desk top, her lips tightening. "You've been brooding too much over Lucine," she said, none too pleased. "If you're getting to the point where you think you can predict her behavior, you're pretty far gone. People are going to be talking about your being queer pretty soon. Why don't you just forget about her and concentrate on—on—well, on Low. He's more fun than she is anyway, I'll bet."

"He'd know," I cried. "He'd tell you too! He knows more about Lucine than anyone thinks."

"So I've heard." There was a nasty purr to her voice that I didn't know it could have. "They've been seen together out in the hills. Well, it's only her mind that's retarded. Remember, she's over twelve now, and some men—"

I slapped the flat of my hand down on the desk top with a sharp crack. I could feel my eyes blazing and she dodged back as though from a blow. She pressed the back of one hand defensively against her cheek.

"I—" she gasped. "I was only kidding!"

I breathed deeply to hold my rage down. "*Are* you going to do anything about Lucine?" My voice was very soft.

"What can I do?" she asked. "What is there to do?"

"Skip it," I said bitterly. "Just skip it."

I tried all afternoon to reach Lucine, but she sat lumpish and unheeding—on top. Underneath violence and hatred were seething like lava and once, without apparent provocation, she leaned across the aisle and pinched Petie's arm until he cried.

She was sitting in isolation with her face to the wall when the last bell rang.

"You may go now, Lucine," I said to the sullen stranger who had replaced the child I knew. I put my hand on her shoulder. She slipped out of my touch with one fluid, *quick* motion. I caught a glimpse of her profile as she left. The jaw muscles were knotted and the cords in her neck were tensed.

I hurried home and waited, almost wild from worry, for Low to get off shift. I paced the worn oriental rug in the living room, circling the potbellied cast-iron heater. I peered a dozen times through the lace curtains, squinting through the dirty, cracked window panes. I beat my fist softly into my palm as I paced, and I felt physical pain when the phone on the wall suddenly shrilled.

I snatched down the receiver.

"Yes!" I cried. "Hello!"

"Marie. I want Marie." The voice was far and crackling. "You tell Marie I gotta talk to her."

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I called Marie and left her to her conversation and went out on the porch. Back and forth, back and forth I paced, Marie's voice swelling and fading as I passed.

". . . well, I expected it a long time ago. A crazy girl like that—"

"Lucine!" I shouted and rushed indoors. "What happened?"

"Lucine?" Marie frowned from the telephone. "What's Lucine gotta do with it? Marson's daughter ran off last night with the hoistman at the Golden Turkey. He's fifty if he's a day and she's just turned sixteen." She turned back to the phone. "Yah, yah, yah?" Her eyes gleamed avidly.

I just got back to the door in time to see the car stop at the gate. I grabbed my coat and was down the steps as the car door swung open.

"Lucine?" I gasped.

"Yes." The sheriff opened the back door for me, his deputy goggle-eyed with the swiftness of events. "Where is she?"

"I don't know," I said. "What happened?"

"She got mad on the way home." The car spurted away from the hotel. "She picked Petie up by the heels and bashed him against a boulder. She chased the other kids away with rocks and went back and started to work on Petie. He's still alive, but Doc lost count of the stitches and they're transfusing like crazy. Mizz Kanz says you likely know where she is."

"No," I shut my eyes and swallowed. "But we'll find her. Get Low first."

The shift bus was just pulling in at the service station. Low was out of it and into the Sheriff's car before a word could be spoken. I saw my anxiety mirrored on his face before we clasped hands.

For the next two hours, we drove the roads around Kruper. We went to all the places we thought Lucine might have run to, but nowhere, nowhere in all the scrub-covered foothills or the pine-pointed mountains could I sense Lucine.

"We'll take one more sweep—through Poland Canyon. Then if it's no dice, we'll hafta get a posse and Claude's hounds." The Sheriff gunned for the steep rise at the canyon entrance. "Beats me how a kid could get so gone so fast."

"You haven't seen her really run," said Low. "She never can when she's around other people. She's just a little lower than a plane and she can run me into the ground any time. She just shifts her breathing into overdrive and takes off. She could beat Claude's hounds without trying, if it ever came to a run-down."

"Stop!" I grabbed the back of the seat. "Stop the car!"

The car had brakes. We untangled ourselves and got out.

"Over there," I said. "She's over there somewhere." We stared at the brush-matted hillside across the canyon.

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"Gaw-dang!" moaned the Sheriff. "Not in Cleo II! That there hell-hole's been nothing but a jinx since they sunk the first shaft. Water and gas and cave-in sand, every gaw-dang thing in the calendar. I've lugged my share of dead men out of there—me and my dad before me. What makes you think she's in there, Teacher? Yuh see something?"

"I know she's somewhere over there," I evaded. "Maybe not in the mine but she's there."

"Let's get looking," sighed the Sheriff. "I'd give a pretty to know how you saw her clear from the other side of the car." He edged out of the car and lifted a shotgun after him.

"A gun?" I gasped. "For Lucine?"

"You didn't see Petie, did you?" he said. "I did. I go animal hunting with guns."

"No!" I cried. "She'll come for us."

"Might be," he spat reflectively. "Or maybe not."

We crossed the road and plunged into the canyon before the climb.

"Are you sure, Dita?" whispered Low. "I don't reach her at all. Only some predator—"

"That's Lucine," I choked. "That's Lucine."

I felt Low's recoil. "That . . . that *animal?*"

"That animal. Did we do it? Maybe we should have left her alone."

"I don't know." I ached with his distress. "God help me, I don't know."

She *was* in Cleo II.

Over our tense silence, we could hear the rattling of rocks inside as she moved. I was almost physically sick.

"Lucine," I called into the darkness of the drift. "Lucine, come on out. It's time to go home."

A fist-sized rock sent me reeling and I nursed my bruised shoulder with my hand.

"Lucine!" Low's voice was commanding and spread all over the band. An inarticulate snarl answered him.

"Well?" The Sheriff looked at us.

"She's completely crazy," said Low. "We can't reach her at all."

"Gaw-dang," said the Sheriff. "How we gonna get her out?"

No one had an answer and we stood around awkwardly while the late afternoon sun hummed against our backs and puddled softly in the mine entrance. There was a sudden flurry of rocks that rattled all about us, thudding on the bare ground and crackling in the brush —then a low guttural wail that hurt my bones and whitened the Sheriff's face.

"I'm gonna shoot," he said, thinly. "I'm gonna shoot it daid." He hefted the shotgun and shuffled his feet.

"No!" I cried. "A child! A little girl!"

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His eyes turned to me and his mouth twisted.

"That?" he asked and spat.

His deputy tugged at his sleeve and took him to one side and muttered rapidly. I looked uneasily at Low. He was groping for Lucine, his eyes closed, his face tense.

The two men set about gathering up a supply of small-sized rocks. They stacked them ready to hand near the mine entrance. Then, taking simultaneous deep breaths, they started a steady bombardment into the drift. For a while there was an answering shower from the mine, then an outraged squall that faded as Lucine retreated farther into the darkness.

"Gotter!" The two men redoubled their efforts, stepping closer to the entrance, and Low's hand on my arm stopped me from following.

"There's a drop-off in there," he said. "They're trying to drive her into it. I dropped a rock in it once and never heard it land."

"It's murder!" I cried, jerking away, grabbing the Sheriff's arm. "Stop it!"

"You get her any other way," grunted the Sheriff, his muscles rippling under my restraining hand. "Better her dead than Petie and all the rest of us. She's fixing to kill."

"I'll get her," I cried, dropping to my knees and hiding my face in my hands. "I'll get her. Give me a minute." I concentrated as I had never concentrated before. I sent myself stumbling out of me into the darkness of the mine, into a heavier, deeper, uglier darkness and I struggled with the darkness in Lucine until I felt it surging uncontrollably into my own mind. Stubbornly I persisted, trying to flick a fingernail of reason under the edge of this angry unreason to let a little sanity in. Low reached me just before the flood engulfed me. He reached me and held me until I could shudder myself back from hell.

Suddenly there was a rumble from inside the hill—a cracking crash and a yellow billow of dust from the entrance.

There was an animal howl that cut off sharply and then a scream of pure pain and terror—a child's terrified cry, a horrified awakening in the darkness, a cry for help —for light!

"It's Lucine!" I half sobbed. "She's back. What happened?"

"Cave-in!" said the Sheriff, his jaws working. "Shoring gone—rotted out years ago. Gotter for sure now, I guess."

"But it's Lucine again," said Low. "We've got to get her out."

"If that cave-in's where I think it is," said the Sheriff, "she's a gonner. There's a stretch in there that's just silt. Finest, slitheriest stuff you ever felt. Comes like a flood of water. Drowns a feller in dirt." His lips tightened. "First dead man I ever saw, I dragged out of a silt-

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down in there. I was sixteen, I guess—skinniest feller in the batch, so they sent me in after they located the body and shored up a makeshift drift. Dragged him out feet first. Stubborn feller—sucked out of that silt like outa mud. Drownded in dirt. We'll sweat getting this body out, too.

"Well," he hitched up his Levi's. "Might as well git on back to town and git a crew out here."

"She's not dead," said Low. "She's still breathing. She's caught under something and can't get loose."

The Sheriff looked at him through narrowed eyes. "I've heard you're kinda tetched," he said. "Sounds to me like you're having a spell yourself, talking like that.

"Wanta go back to town, ma'am?" His voice gentled. "Nothing you can do around here anymore. She's a gonner."

"No, she isn't," I said. "She's still alive. I can hear her."

"Gaw-dang!" muttered the Sheriff. "Two of them. Well, all right then. You two are deppytized to watch the mine so it don't run away while I'm gone." Grinning sourly at his own wit, he left, taking the deputy with him.

We listened to the echoes of the engine until they died away in the quiet, quiet upsurging of the forested hills all around us. We heard the small wind in the brush and the far cry of some flying bird. We heard the pounding of our own pulses and the frightened bewilderedness that was Lucine. And we heard the pain that began to beat its brassy hammers through her body, and the sharp piercing stab of sheer agony screaming up to the bright twanging climax that snapped down into unconsciousness. And then both of us were groping in the darkness of the tunnel. I stumbled and fell and felt a heavy flowing something spread across my lap, weighting me down. Low was floundering ahead of me. "Go back," he warned. "Go back or we'll both be caught."

"No!" I cried, trying to scramble forward. "I can't leave you!"

"Go back," he said. "I'll find her and hold her until the men come. You've got to help me hold the silt back."

"I can't," I whimpered. "I don't know how!" I scooped at the heaviness in my lap.

"Yes, you do," he said down under. "Just look and see."

I scrambled back the interminable distance I hadn't even been conscious of when going in, and crouched just outside the mine entrance, my dirty hands pressed to my wet face. I looked deep, deep inside me—down into a depth that suddenly became a height. I lifted me, mind and soul, up, up, until I found a new Persuasion, a new ability, and slowly, slowly, stemmed the creeping dry tide inside the mine—slowly began to

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part the black flood that had overswept Lucine so that only the arch of her arm kept her mouth and nose free of the invading silt.

Low burrowed his way into the mass, straining to reach Lucine before all the air was gone.

We were together, working such a work that we weren't two people any more. We were one, but that one was a multitude, all bound together in this tremendous outpouring of effort. Since we were each other, we had no need for words as we worked in toward Lucine. We found a bent knee, a tattered hem, a twisted ankle—and the splintery edge of timber that pinned her down. I held the silt back while Low burrowed to find her head. Carefully, we cleared a larger space for her face. Carefully we worked to free her body. Low finally held her limp shoulders in his arms—*and was gone! Gone completely, between one breath and another.*

"Low!" I screamed, scrambling to my feet at the tunnel's mouth, but the sound of my cry was drowned in the smashing crash that shook the ground. I watched horrified as the hillside dimpled and subsided and sank into silence after a handful of pebbles, almost hidden in a puff of dust, rattled to rest at my feet.

I screamed again and the sky spun in a dizzy spiral rimmed with sharp pine tops and suddenly unaccountably Severeid Swanson was there joining the treetops and the sky and spinning with them as he said, "Teesher! Teesher!"

The world steadied as though a hand had been put upon it. I scrambled to my feet.

"Severeid!" I cried. "They're in there! Help me get them out! Help me!"

"Teesher," Severeid shrugged helplessly, *"no comprendo.* I bring a flying one. I go get him. You say you gotta find. I find him. What you do out here with tears?"

Before I was conscious of another person standing beside Severeid, I felt another person in my mind. Before I could bring my gasping into articulation, the words were taken from me. Before I could move, I heard the rending of rocks, and turning, I sank to my knees and watched, in terrified wonder, the whole of the hillside lift itself and arch away like a furrow of turned earth before a plowshare. I saw silt rise like a yellow-red fountain above the furrow. I saw Low and Lucine rise with the silt. I saw the hillside flow back upon itself. I saw Low and Lucine lowered to the ground before me and saw all the light fading as I fell forward, my finger tips grazing the curve of Low's cheek just before I drank deeply of blackness.

The sun was all. Through the thin blanket I could feel the cushioning of the fine sand under my

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cheek. I could hear the cold blowing overhead through the sighing trees, but where we were, the warmth of the late fall sun was gathered between granite palms and poured down into our tiny pocket against the mountain. Without moving I could reach Low and Valancy and Jemmy. Without opening my eye, I could see them around me, strengthening me. The moment grew too dear to hold. I rolled over and sat up.

"Tell me again," I said. "How did Severeid ever find you the second time?"

I didn't mind the indulgent smile Valancy and Jemmy exchanged. I didn't mind feeling like a child—if they were the measure of adults.

"The first time he ever saw us," said Jemmy, "was when he chose to sleep off his vino around a boulder from where we chose to picnic. He was so drunk, or so childlike, or both, that he wasn't amazed or outraged by our lifting and tumbling all over the sky. He was intrigued and delighted. He thought he had died and by-passed purgatory and we had to restrain him to keep him from taking off after us. Of course, before we let him go we blocked his memory of us so he couldn't talk of us to anyone except others of The People." He smiled at me. "That's why we got real shook when we found that he'd told you and that you're not of The People. At least not of The Home. You're the third blow to our provincialism. Peter and Bethie were the first, but at least they were half of The People; but you—" He waggled his head mournfully. "You just didn't track."

"Yes," I shivered, remembering the long years I hadn't tracked with anyone. "I just didn't track. . . ." And I relaxed under the triple reassurance that flooded in from Low and Jemmy and his wife Valancy.

"Well, when you told Severeid you wanted to find us, he stumbled as straight as a wino string back to our old picnic grounds. He must have huddled over that tiny fire of his for several days before we found him—parched with thirst and far past his last memory of food." Jemmy drew a long breath.

"Well, when we found out that Severeid knew of what we thought were two more of Us—we've been in-gathering ever since the ships first arrived—*well!* We slept him all the way back. He would have been most unhappy with the speed and altitude of that return trip—especially without a car or plane.

"I caught your struggle to save Lucine when we were still miles away; and, praise the Power, I got there in time."

"Yes," I breathed, taking warmth from Low's hand to thaw my memory of that moment.

"That's the quickest I ever platted anything," said Jemmy.

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"And the first time I ever did it on a scale like that. I wasn't sure that the late sunlight, without the moonlight, was strong enough, so I was open-mouthed myself at the way the mountain ripped open." He smiled weakly. "Maybe it's just as well that we curb our practice of some of our Persuasions. It was really shake-making!"

"That's for sure!" I shivered. "I wonder what Severeid thought of the deal?"

"We gave Severeid forgetfulness of the whole mine episode," said Valancy. "But, as Jemmy would say, the Sheriff was considerably shook when he got back with the crew. His only articulate pronouncement was, 'Gaw-dang! Cleo II's finally gone!'"

"And Lucine . . . ?" I asked, saving the answer I already knew.

"And Lucine is learning," said Valancy. "Bethie, our Sensitive, found what was wrong and it is mended now. She'll be normal very shortly."

"And . . . me?" I breathed, hoping I knew.

One of us! the three cried to me down under. *Earth born or not—one of us!*

"But what a problem!" said Jemmy. "We thought we had us all catalogued. There were those of us completely of The People and those who were half of The People and half of earth like Bethie and Peter. And then *you* came along. Not one bit of The People!"

"No," I said, comfortably leaning against my ancestral stone wall again. "Not one bit of The People."

"You look like confirmation of something we've been wondering about though," said Valancy. "Perhaps after all this long time of detour, the people of earth are beginning to reach the Persuasions too. We've had hints of such developments but in such little bits and snippits in these research deals. We had no idea that anyone was so far along the Way. No telling how many others there are all over the world waiting to be found."

"Hiding, you mean," I said. "You don't go around asking to be found. Not after the first few reactions you get. Oh, maybe in the first fine flush of discovery you hurry to share the wonder, but you learn quickly enough to hide."

"But so like us!" cried Valancy. "Two worlds and yet you're so like us!"

"But she can't inanimate-lift," teased Low.

"And you can't glow," I retorted.

"And you can't sun-and-moonlight-platt," said Jemmy.

"Nor you cloud-herd," I said. "And if you don't stop picking on me, I'll do just that right now and snatch that shower away from—from Morenci and drench you all!"

"And she could do it!" laughed Valancy. "And we can't, so let's leave her alone."

We all fell silent, relaxing on the sun-warmed sand until Jemmy

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rolled over and opened one eye.

"You know, Valancy, Dita and Low can communicate more freely than you and I. With them it's sometimes almost involuntary."

Valancy rolled over too. "Yes," she said. "And Dita can block me out too. Only a Sorter is supposed to be able to block a Sorter and she's not a Sorter."

Jemmy waggled his head. "Just like earthlings! Always out of step . . . What a problem this gal's going to be!"

Yep, Low cut in underneath. *A problem and a half, but I think I'll keep her anyway.* I could feel his tender laughter.

I closed my eyes against the sun, feeling it golden across my lids.

I'm un-lost, I thought incredulously, aching with the sudden joy of it. *I'm really un-lost!*

I took tight hold of the hem of my dream, knowing finally and surely that someday I would be able to wrap the whole fabric of it around me, and not only around me but around others who were lost and bewildered, too. Someday we would all *Be* what was only a dream now.

Softly I drowsed, Low's hand warm upon my cheek—drowsed finally, without dreading an awakening.

Coming Next Month

Walter M. Miller, Jr.'s tender, half-humorous and deeply moving stories of the monks of the Albertian Order of St. Leibowitz (*A Canticle for Leibowitz* and *And the Light is Risen*) have called forth as much highly enthusiastic mail from you as anything F&SF has yet published. Now Mr. Miller concludes the trilogy with a short novel, *The Last Canticle,* in which the Albertians face the most perilous problem they have met on this earth . . . and move forward to the stars. Our February issue, on the stands around the first of the year, will also feature Poul Anderson's *Journeys End,* with a sensitive new suggestion on the nature of telepathy and of love, and the return of Manly Wade Wellman's beloved ballad-singer, John, in *Old Devlins was a-Waiting*—plus the conclusion of Arthur C. Clarke's delightful moon-venture and other features, including an important article by s.f.'s leading historian, Sam Moskowitz, which conclusively establishes, for the first time, the exact origin of the term *science fiction.*

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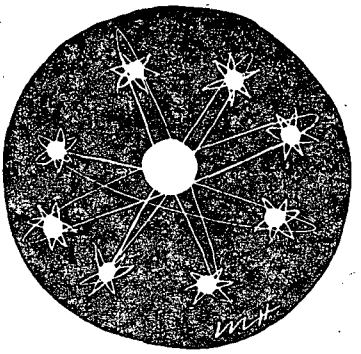

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Ghosts for Christmas: I

At Christmastide, Shakespeare tells us, "no spirit can walk abroad . . . so hallowed and so gracious is the time." This may be precisely why we have more need, at this season, of ghosts in fiction, and why the Christmas Ghost Story is as venerable an Anglo-Saxon tradition as plum pudding or holly (and far more deeply rooted than such modern upstarts as Santa Claus and Christmas cards). So F&SF brings you, for Christmas, 1956, two contrasting ghost stories, one of the old school and one of the new.

Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu (1814–1873) created the modern "psychological suspense" novel 80 years ahead of its time in his classic UNCLE SILAS, *edited several important magazines, and wrote a number of the finest ghost stories of the nineteenth century, including such anthology favorites as* Green Tea *and* Carmilla. *The story reprinted here is virtually a "lost" Le Fanu. It was written for the 1871 Christmas issue of* Once a Week *(and the gratuitous reference to Christmas in the first paragraph shows how strong was the Yule-ghost tradition) and has never been reprinted since save in one obscure British anthology 23 years ago. To my best knowledge, it has never appeared in any collection of Le Fanu's work nor ever before been printed in this country.*

The Dead Sexton, *like many of Le Fanu's fantasies, has an authentic folk flavor and may well be based on popular legend. It nicely typifies his easy, realistic handling of horrors (which so much influenced M. R. James) —and it offers a vivid sketch of one of the most dashing gentleman-fiends in fiction.*

The Dead Sexton

by SHERIDAN LE FANU

THE SUNSETS WERE RED, THE NIGHTS were long, and the weather pleasantly frosty; and Christmas, the glorious herald of the New Year, was at hand, when an event—still recounted by winter firesides, with a horror made delightful by the mellowing influence of years—occurred in the beautiful little town of Golden Friars, and signalized, as the scene of its catastrophe, the old inn known throughout a wide

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region of the Northumbrian counties as the George and Dragon.

Toby Crooke, the sexton, was lying dead in the old coach-house in the inn yard. The body had been discovered, only half an hour before this story begins, under strange circumstances, and in a place where it might have lain the better part of a week undisturbed; and a dreadful suspicion astounded the village of Golden Friars.

A wintry sunset was glaring through a gorge of the western mountains, turning into fire the twigs of the leafless elms, and all the tiny blades of grass on the green by which the quaint little town is surrounded. It is built of light, grey stone, with steep gables and slender chimneys rising with airy lightness from the level sward by the margin of the beautiful lake, and backed by the grand amphitheatre of the fells at the other side, whose snowy peaks show faintly against the sky, tinged with the vaporous red of the western light. As you descend towards the margin of the lake, and see Golden Friars, its taper chimneys and slender gables, its curious old inn and gorgeous sign, and over all the graceful tower and spire of the ancient church, at this hour or by moonlight, in the solemn grandeur and stillness of the natural scenery that surrounds it, it stands before you like a fairy town.

Toby Crooke, the lank sexton, now fifty or upwards, had passed an hour or two with some village cronies, over a solemn pot of purl, in the kitchen of that cosy hostelry, the night before. He generally turned in there at about seven o'clock, and heard the news. This contented him; for he talked little, and looked always surly.

Many things are now raked up and talked over about him.

In early youth, he had been a bit of a scamp. He broke his indentures, and ran away from his master, the tanner of Bryemere; he had got into fifty bad scrapes and out again; and, just as the little world of Golden Friars had come to the conclusion that it would be well for all parties—except, perhaps, himself—and a happy riddance for his afflicted mother, if he were sunk, with a gross of quart pots about his neck, in the bottom of the lake in which the grey gables, the elms, and the towering fells of Golden Friars are mirrored, he suddenly returned, a reformed man at the ripe age of forty.

For twelve years he had disappeared and no one knew what had become of him. Then, suddenly, as I say, he reappeared at Golden Friars—a very black and silent man, sedate and orderly. His mother was dead and buried; but the "prodigal son" was received good-naturedly. The good vicar, Doctor Jenner, reported to his wife:

"His hard heart has been softened, dear Dolly. I saw him dry his eyes at the sermon yesterday."

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"I don't wonder, Hugh darling. I know the part—'There is joy in Heaven.' I am sure it was—wasn't it? It was quite beautiful. I almost cried myself."

The Vicar laughed gently, and stooped over her chair and kissed her, and patted her cheek fondly.

"You think too well of your old man's sermons," he said. "I preach, you see, Dolly, very much to the *poor*. If *they* understand me, I am pretty sure everyone else must; and I think that my simple style goes more home to both feelings and conscience—"

"You ought to have told me of his crying before. You *are* so eloquent," exclaimed Dolly Jenner. "No one preaches like my man. I have never heard such sermons."

Not many, we may be sure; for the good lady had not heard more than six from any other divine for the last twenty years.

The personages of Golden Friars talked Toby Crooke over on his return. Doctor Lincote said:

"He must have led a hard life; he had *dried in* so, and got a good deal of hard muscle." Lincote fancied he had been soldiering—he stood like a soldier; and the mark over his right eye looked like a gunshot.

People might wonder how he could have survived a gunshot over the eye; but was not Lincote a doctor—and an army doctor to boot—when he was young; and who, in Golden Friars, could dispute with him on points of surgery? And I believe the truth is, that this mark had been really made by a pistol bullet.

Mr. Jarlcot, the attorney, would "go bail" he had picked up some sense in his travels; and honest Turnbull, the host of the George and Dragon, said heartily:

"We must look for something for him to put his hand to. *Now's* the time to make a man of him."

The end of it was that he became, among other things, the sexton of Golden Friars.

He was a punctual sexton. He meddled with no other person's business; but he was a silent man, and by no means popular. He was reserved in company; and he used to walk alone by the shore of the lake, while other fellows played at fives or skittles; and when he visited the kitchen of the George, he had his liquor to himself, and in the midst of the general talk was a saturnine listener. There was something sinister in this man's face; and when things went wrong with him, he could look dangerous enough.

There were whispered stories in Golden Friars about Toby Crooke. Nobody could say how they got there. Nothing is more mysterious than the spread of rumour. It is like a vial poured on the air. It travels, like an epidemic, on the sightless currents of the atmosphere, or by the laws of a telluric influence equally intangible. These

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stories treated, though darkly, of the long period of his absence from his native village; but they took no well-defined shape, and no one could refer them to any authentic source.

The Vicar's charity was of the kind that thinketh no evil; and in such cases he always insisted on proof. Crooke was, of course, undisturbed in his office.

On the evening before the tragedy came to light—trifles are always remembered after the catastrophe—a boy, returning along the margin of the mere, passed him by seated on a prostrate trunk of a tree, under the "bield" of a rock, counting silver money. His lean body and limbs were bent together, his knees were up to his chin, and his long fingers were telling the coins over hurriedly in the hollow of his other hand. He glanced at the boy, as the old English saying is, like "the devil looking over Lincoln." But a black and sour look from Mr. Crooke, who never had a smile for a child nor a greeting for a wayfarer, was nothing strange.

Toby Crooke lived in the grey stone house, cold and narrow, that stands near the church porch, with the window of its staircase looking out into the churchyard, where so much of his labour, for many a day, had been expended. The greater part of this house was untenanted.

The old woman who was in charge of it slept in a settle-bed, among broken stools, old sacks, rotten chests, and other rattle-traps, in the small room at the rear.

At what time of the night she could not tell, she awoke, and saw a man, with his hat on, in her room. He had a candle in his hand, which he shaded with his coat from her eyes; his back was towards her, and he was rummaging in the drawer in which she usually kept her money.

Having got her quarter's pension of two pounds that day, however, she had placed it, folded in a rag, in the corner of her tea caddy, and locked it up in the "eat-malison" or cupboard.

She was frightened when she saw the figure in her room, and she could not tell whether her visitor might not have made his entrance from the contiguous churchyard. So, sitting bolt upright in her bed, her grey hair almost lifting her kerchief off her head, and all over in "a fit o' t' creepins," as she expressed it, she demanded:

"In God's name, what want ye thar?"

"Whar's the peppermint ye used to hev by ye, woman? I'm bad wi' an inward pain."

"It's all gane a month sin'," she answered; and offered to make him a "het" drink if he'd get to his room.

But he said:

"Never mind, I'll try a cup o' gin."

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And, turning on his heel, he left her.

In the morning the sexton was gone. Not only in his lodging was there no account of him, but, when inquiry began to be extended, nowhere in the village of Golden Friars could he be found.

Still he might have gone off on business of his own, to some distant village, before the town was stirring; and the sexton had no near kindred to trouble their heads about him. People, therefore, were willing to wait, and take his return ultimately for granted.

At three o'clock the good Vicar, standing at his hall door, looking across the lake towards the noble fells that rise, steep and furrowed, from that beautiful mere, saw two men approaching across the green, in a straight line, from a boat that was moored at the water's edge. They were carrying between them something which, though not very large, seemed ponderous.

"Ye'll ken this, sir," said one of the boatmen as they set down, almost at his feet, a small church bell, such as in old-fashioned chimes yields the treble notes.

"This won't be less nor five stean. I ween it's fra' the church steeple yon."

"What! one of our church bells?" ejaculated the Vicar—for a moment lost in horrible amazement. "Oh, no!—*no,* that can't possibly be! Where did you find it?"

He had found the boat, in the morning, moored about fifty yards from her moorings where he had left it the night before, and could not think how that came to pass; and now, as he and his partner were about to take their oars, they discovered this bell in the bottom of the boat, under a bit of canvas, also the sexton's pick and spade—"tom-spey'ad," they termed that peculiar, broad-bladed implement.

"Very extraordinary! We must try whether there is a bell missing from the tower," said the Vicar, getting into a fuss. "Has Crooke come back yet? Does anyone know where he is?"

The sexton had not yet turned up.

"That's odd—that's provoking," said the Vicar. "However, my key will let us in. Place the bell in the hall while I get it; and then we can see what all this means."

To the church, accordingly, they went, the Vicar leading the way, with his own key in his hand. He turned it in the lock, and stood in the shadow of the ground porch, and shut the door.

A sack, half full, lay on the ground, with open mouth, a piece of cord lying beside it. Something clanked within it as one of the men shoved it aside with his clumsy shoe.

The Vicar opened the church door and peeped in. The dusky glow from the western sky, entering through a narrow window, illuminated the shafts and arches,

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the old oak carvings, and the discoloured monuments, with the melancholy glare of a dying fire.

The Vicar withdrew his head and closed the door. The gloom of the porch was deeper than ever as, stooping, he entered the narrow door that opened at the foot of the winding stair that leads to the first loft; from which a rude ladder-stair of wood, some five and twenty feet in height, mounts through a trap to the ringers' loft.

Up the narrow stairs the Vicar climbed, followed by his attendants, to the first loft. It was very dark: a narrow bow-slit in the thick wall admitted the only light they had to guide them. The ivy leaves, seen from the deep shadow, flashed and flickered redly, and the sparrows twittered among them.

"Will one of you be so good as to go up and count the bells, and see if they are all right?" said the Vicar. "There should be—"

"Agoy! what's that?" exclaimed one of the men, recoiling from the foot of the ladder.

"By Jen!" ejaculated the other.

"Good gracious!" gasped the Vicar, who, seeing indistinctly a dark mass lying on the floor, had stooped to examine it, and placed his hand upon a cold, dead face.

The men drew the body into the streak of light that traversed the floor.

It was the corpse of Toby Crooke! There was a frightful scar across his forehead.

The alarm was given. Doctor Lincote, and Mr. Jarlcot, and Turnbull, of the George and Dragon, were on the spot immediately; and many curious and horrified spectators of minor importance.

The first thing ascertained was that the man must have been many hours dead. The next was that his skull was fractured, across the forehead, by an awful blow. The next was that his neck was broken.

His hat was found on the floor, where he had probably laid it, with his handkerchief in it.

The mystery now began to clear a little; for a bell—one of the chime hung in the tower—was found where it had rolled to, against the wall, with blood and hair on the rim of it, which corresponded with the grizzly fracture across the front of his head.

The sack that lay in the vestibule was examined, and found to contain all the church plate; a silver salver that had disappeared, about a month before, from Dr. Lincote's store of valuables; the Vicar's gold pencil-case, which he thought he had forgot in the vestry book; silver spoons, and various other contributions, levied from time to time off a dozen different households, the mysterious disappearance of which spoils had, of late years, begun to make the honest little community uncomfortable. Two bells had been taken down from the chime; and now the shrewd part of the assemblage, put-

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ting things together, began to comprehend the nefarious plans of the sexton, who lay mangled and dead on the floor of the tower, where only two days ago he had tolled the holy bell to call the good Christians of Golden Friars to worship.

The body was carried into the yard of the George and Dragon and laid in the old coach-house; and the townsfolk came grouping in to have a peep at the corpse, and stood round, looking darkly, and talking as low as if they were in a church.

The Vicar, in gaiters and slightly shovel hat, stood erect, as one in a little circle of notables—the doctor, the attorney, Sir Geoffrey Mardykes, who happened to be in the town, and Turnbull, the host—in the centre of the paved yard, they having made an inspection of the body, at which troops of the village stragglers, to-ing and fro-ing, were gaping and frowning as they whispered their horrible conjectures.

"What d'ye think o' that?" said Tom Scales, the old hostler of the George, looking pale, with a stern, faint smile on his lips, as he and Dick Linklin sauntered out of the coach-house together.

"The deaul will hev his ain noo," answered Dick, in his friend's ear. "T' sexton's got a craigthraw like he gav' the lass over the clints of Scarsdale; ye mind what the ald soger telt us when he hid his face in the kitchen of the George here? By Jen! I'll ne'er forget that story."

"I ween 'twas all true enough," replied the hostler; "and the sizzup he gav' the sleepin' man wi' t' poker across the forehead. See whar the edge o' t' bell took him, and smashed his ain, the self-same lids. By ma sang, I wonder the deaul did na carry awa' his corpse i' the night, as he did wi' Tam Lunder's at Mooltern Mill."

"Hout, man, who ever sid t' deaul inside o' a church?"

"The corpse is ill-faur'd enew to scare Satan himsel', for that matter; though it's true what you say. Ay, ye're reet tul a trippet, thar; for Beelzebub dar'n't show his snout inside the church, not the length o' the black o' my nail."

While this discussion was going on, the gentlefolk who were talking the matter over in the centre of the yard had dispatched a message for the coroner all the way to the town of Hextan.

The last tint of sunset was fading from the sky by this time; so, of course, there was no thought of an inquest earlier than next day.

In the meantime it was horribly clear that the sexton had intended to rob the church of its plate, and had lost his life in the attempt to carry the second bell, as we have seen, down the worn ladder of the tower. He had tumbled backwards and broken his neck upon the floor of the loft; and the heavy bell, in its fall, descended with its edge across his forehead.

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Never was a man more completely killed by a double catastrophe, in a moment.

The bells and the contents of the sack, it was surmised, he meant to have conveyed across the lake that night, and with the help of his spade and pick to have buried them in Clousted Forest, and returned, after an absence of but a few hours—as he easily might—before morning, unmissed and unobserved. He would, no doubt, having secured his booty, have made such arrangements as would have made it appear that the church had been broken into. He would, of course, have taken all measures to divert suspicion from himself, and have watched a suitable opportunity to repossess himself of the buried treasure and dispose of it in safety.

And now came out, into sharp relief, all the stories that had, one way or other, stolen after him into the town. Old Mrs. Pullen fainted when she saw him, and told Doctor Lincote, after, that she thought he was the highwayman who fired the shot that killed the coachman the night they were robbed on Hounslow Heath. There were the stories also told by the wayfaring old soldier with the wooden leg, and fifty others, up to now more than half disregarded, but which now seized on the popular belief with a startling grasp.

The fleeting light soon expired, and twilight turned into night.

The inn yard gradually became quiet; and the dead sexton lay alone, in the dark, on his back, locked up in the old coach-house, the key of which was safe in the pocket of Tom Scales, the trusty old hostler of the George.

It was about eight o'clock, and the hostler, standing alone on the road in the front of the open door of the George and Dragon, had just smoked his pipe out. A bright moon hung in the frosty sky. The fells rose from the opposite edge of the lake like phantom mountains. The air was stirless. Through the boughs and sprays of the leafless elms no sigh or motion, however hushed, was audible. Not a ripple glimmered on the lake, which at one point only reflected the brilliant moon from its dark blue expanse like burnished steel. The road that runs by the inn door, along the margin of the lake, shone dazzlingly white.

White as ghosts, among the dark holly and juniper, stood the tall piers of the Vicar's gate, and their great stone balls, like heads, overlooking the same road, a few hundred yards up the lake, to the left. The early little town of Golden Friars was quiet by this time. Except for the townsfolk who were now collected in the kitchen of the inn itself, no inhabitant was now outside his own threshold.

Tom Scales was thinking of turning in. He was beginning to feel a little queer. He was thinking

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of the sexton, and could not get the fixed features of the dead man out of his head, when he heard the sharp though distant ring of a horse's hoof upon the frozen road. Tom's instinct apprized him of the approach of a guest to the George and Dragon. His experienced ear told him that the horseman was approaching by the Dardale road, which, after crossing that wide and dismal moss, passes the southern fells by Dunner Cleugh and finally enters the town of Golden Friars by joining the Mardykes-road, at the edge of the lake, close to the gate of the Vicar's house.

A clump of tall trees stood at this point; but the moon shone full upon the road and cast their shadow backward.

The hoofs were plainly coming at a gallop, with a hollow rattle. The horseman was a long time in appearing. Tom wondered how he had heard the sound—so sharply frosty was the air—so far away.

He was right in his guess. The visitor was coming over the mountainous road from Dardale Moss; and he now saw a horseman, who must have turned the corner of the Vicar's house at the moment when his eye was wearied; for when he saw him for the first time he was advancing, in the hazy moonlight, like the shadow of a cavalier, at a dead gallop, upon the level strip of road that skirts the margin of the mere, between the George and the Vicar's piers.

The hostler had not long to wonder why the rider pushed his beast at so furious a pace, and how he came to have heard him, as he now calculated, at least three miles away. A very few moments sufficed to bring horse and rider to the inn door.

It was a powerful black horse, something like the great Irish hunter that figured a hundred years ago, and would carry sixteen stone with ease across country. It would have made a grand charger. Not a hair turned. It snorted, it pawed, it arched its neck; then threw back its ears and down its head, and looked ready to lash, and then to rear; and seemed impatient to be off again, and incapable of standing quiet for a moment.

The rider got down

"As light as shadow falls."

But he was a tall, sinewy figure. He wore a cape or short mantle, a cocked hat, and a pair of jack-boots, such as held their ground in some primitive corners of England almost to the close of the last century.

"Take him, lad," said he to old Scales. "You need not walk or wisp him—he never sweats or tires. Give him his oats, and let him take his own time to eat them. House!" cried the stranger—in the old-fashioned form of summons which still lingered, at that time, in out-of-the-way places—in a deep and piercing voice.

As Tom Scales led the horse

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away to the stables it turned its head towards its master with a short, shrill neigh.

"About *your* business, old gentleman—we must not go too fast," the stranger cried back again to his horse, with a laugh as harsh and piercing; and he strode into the house.

The hostler led this horse into the inn yard. In passing, it sidled up to the coach-house gate, within which lay the dead sexton—snorted, pawed and lowered its head suddenly, with ear close to the plank, as if listening for a sound from within; then uttered again the same short, piercing neigh.

The hostler was chilled at this mysterious coquetry with the dead. He liked the brute less and less every minute.

In the meantime, its master had proceeded.

"I'll go to the inn kitchen," he said, in his startling bass, to the drawer who met him in the passage.

And on he went, as if he had known the place all his days: not seeming to hurry himself—stepping leisurely, the servant thought—but gliding on at such a rate, nevertheless, that he had passed his guide and was in the kitchen of the George before he had got much more than halfway to it.

A roaring fire of dry wood, peat and coal lighted up this snug but spacious apartment—flashing on pots and pans, and dressers high-piled with pewter plates and dishes; and making the uncertain shadows of the long "hanks" of onions and many a flitch and ham, depending from the ceiling, dance on its glowing surface.

The doctor and the attorney, even Sir Geoffrey Mardykes, did not disdain on this occasion to take chairs and smoke their pipes by the kitchen fire, where they were in the thick of the gossip and discussion excited by the terrible event.

The tall stranger entered uninvited.

He looked like a gaunt, athletic Spaniard of forty, burned half black in the sun, with a bony, flattened nose. A pair of fierce black eyes were just visible under the edge of his hat; and his mouth seemed divided, beneath the moustache, by the deep scar of a hare-lip.

Sir Geoffrey Mardykes and the host of the George, aided by the doctor and the attorney, were discussing and arranging, for the third or fourth time, their theories about the death and the probable plans of Toby Crooke, when the stranger entered.

The newcomer lifted his hat, with a sort of smile, for a moment from his black head.

"What do you call this place, gentlemen?" asked the stranger.

"The town of Golden Friars, sir," answered the doctor politely.

"The George and Dragon, sir:

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Anthony Turnbull, at your service," answered mine host, with a solemn bow, at the same moment —so that the two voices went together, as if the doctor and the innkeeper were singing a catch.

"The George and the Dragon," repeated the horseman, expanding his long hands over the fire which he had approached. "Saint George, King George, the Dragon, the Devil: it is a very grand idol, that outside your door, sir. You catch all sorts of worshippers—courtiers, fanatics, scamps: all's fish, eh? Everybody welcome, provided he drinks like one. Suppose you brew a bowl or two of punch. I'll stand it. How many are we? *Here*—count, and let us have enough. Gentlemen, I mean to spend the night here, and my horse is in the stable. What holiday, fun, or fair has got so many pleasant faces together? When I last called here—for, now I bethink me, I have seen the place before—you all looked sad. It was on a Sunday, that dismalest of holidays; and it would have been positively melancholy only that your sexton—that saint upon earth—Mr. Crooke, was here." He was looking round, over his shoulder, and added: "Ha! don't I see him there?"

Frightened a good deal were some of the company. All gaped in the direction in which, with a nod, he turned his eyes.

"He's *not* thar—he *can't* be thar —we *see* he's not thar," said Turnbull, as dogmatically as old Joe Willet might have delivered himself—for he did not care that the George should earn the reputation of a haunted house. "He's met an accident, sir: he's dead—he's elsewhere—and therefore can't be here."

Upon this the company entertained the stranger with the narrative—which they made easy by a division of labour, two or three generally speaking at a time, and no one being permitted to finish a second sentence without finding himself corrected and supplanted.

"The man's in Heaven, so sure as you're not," said the traveller so soon as the story was ended. "What! he was fiddling with the church bell, was he, and d——d for that—eh? Landlord, get us some drink. A sexton d——d for pulling down a church bell he has been pulling at for ten years!"

"You came, sir, by the Dardale road, I believe?" said the doctor (village folk are curious). "A dismal moss is Dardale Moss, sir; and a bleak clim' up the fells on t'other side."

"I say 'Yes' to all— from Dardale Moss, as black as pitch and as rotten as the grave, up that zigzag wall you call a road, that looks like chalk in the moonlight, through Dunner Cleugh, as dark as a coal-pit, and down here to the George and the Dragon, where you have a roaring fire, wise men, good punch—here it is—and a

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corpse in your coach-house. Where the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together. Come, landlord, ladle out the nectar. Drink, gentlemen—drink, all. Brew another bowl at the bar. How divinely it stinks of alcohol! I hope you like it, gentlemen: it smells all over of spices, like a mummy. Drink, friends. Ladle, landlord. Drink, all. Serve it out."

The guest fumbled in his pocket, and produced three guineas, which he slipped into Turnbull's fat palm.

"Let punch flow till that's out. I'm an old friend of the house. I call here, back and forward. I know you well, Turnbull, though you don't recognize me."

"You have the advantage of me, sir," said Mr. Turnbull, looking hard on that dark and sinister countenance—which, or the like of which, he could have sworn he had never seen before in his life. But he liked the weight and colour of his guineas, as he dropped them into his pocket. "I hope you will find yourself comfortable while you stay."

"You have given me a bedroom?"

"Yes, sir—the cedar chamber."

"I know it—the very thing. No—no punch for me. By and by, perhaps."

The talk went on, but the stranger had grown silent. He had seated himself on an oak bench by the fire, towards which he extended his feet and hands with seeming enjoyment; his cocked hat being, however, a little over his face.

Gradually the company began to thin. Sir Geoffrey Mardykes was the first to go; then some of the humbler townsfolk. The last bowl of punch was on its last legs. The stranger walked into the passage and said to the drawer:

"Fetch me a lantern. I must see my nag. Light it—hey! That will do. No—you need not come."

The gaunt traveller took it from the man's hand and strode along the passage to the door of the stable-yard, which he opened, and passed out.

Tom Scales, standing on the pavement, was looking through the stable window at the horses when the stranger plucked his shirt-sleeve. With an inward shock the hostler found himself alone in presence of the very person he had been thinking of.

"I say—they tell me you have something to look at in there"—he pointed with his thumb at the old coach-house door. "Let us have a peep."

Tom Scales happened to be at that moment in a state of mind highly favourable to anyone in search of a submissive instrument. He was in great perplexity, and even perturbation. He suffered the stranger to lead him to the coach-house gate.

"You must come in and hold the lantern. I'll pay you well."

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The old hostler applied his key and removed the padlock.

"What are you afraid of? Step in and throw the light on his face," said the stranger grimly. "Throw open the lantern: stand *there*. Stoop over him a little—he won't bite you. Steady, or you may pass the night with him!"

In the meantime the company at the George had dispersed; and, shortly after, Anthony Turnbull —who, like a good landlord, was always last in bed, and first up, in his house—was taking, alone, his last look round the kitchen before making his final visit to the stable-yard, when Tom Scales tottered into the kitchen, looking like death, his hair standing upright; and he sat down on an oak chair, all in a tremble, wiped his forehead with his hand, and heaved a great sigh.

It was not till after he had swallowed a dram of brandy that he found his voice, and said:

"We've the deaul himsel' in t' house! By Jen! ye'd best send for t' sir [the clergyman]. Happen he'll tak him in hand wi' holy writ, and send him elsewhidder deftly. Lord atween us and harm! I'm a sinfu' man. I tell ye, Mr. Turnbull, I dar'n't stop in t' George to-night under the same roof wi' him."

"Ye mean the ra-beyoned, black-feyaced lad, wi' the brocken neb? Why, that's a gentleman wi' a pocket full o' guineas, man, and a horse worth fifty pounds!"

"That horse is no better nor his rider. The nags that were in the stable wi' him, they all tuk the creepins, and sweated like rain down a thack. I tuk them all out o' that, away from him, into the hack-stable, and I thocht I cud never get them past him. But that's not all. When I was keekin inta t' winda at the nags, he comes behint me and claps his claw on ma shouther, and he gars me gang wi' him, and open the aad coach-house door, and haad the cannle for him, till he pearked into the deed man's feyace; and, as God's my judge, I sid the corpse open its eyes and wark its mouth, like a man smoorin' and strivin' to talk. I cudna move or say a word, though I felt my hair rising on my heed; but at lang-last I gev a yelloch, and says I, 'La! what is that?' And he himsel' looked round on me, like the devil he is; and, wi' a skirl o' a laugh, he strikes the lantern out o' my hand. When I cum to myself we were outside the coach-house door. The moon was shinin' in, and I cud see the corpse stretched on the table whar we left it; and he kicked the door to wi' a purr o' his foot. 'Lock it,' says he; and so I did. And here's the key for ye—tak it yoursel', sir. He offer'd me money: he said he'd mak me a rich man if I'd sell him the corpse, and help him awa' wi' it."

"Hout, man! What cud he want o' t' corpse? He was takin' a rise out o' ye, lad," said Turnbull.

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"Na, na—he wants the corpse. There's summat you a' me can't tell he wants to do wi' 't; and he'd liefer get it wi' sin and thievin', and the damage of my soul. He's one of them freytens a boo or a dobbies off Dardale Moss, that's always astir wi' the like after nightfall; unless—Lord save us!—he be the deual himsel'."

"Whar is he noo?" asked the landlord, who was growing uncomfortable.

"He spang'd up the back stair to his room. I wonder you didn't hear him trampin' like a wild horse; and he clapt his door that the house shook again—but Lord knows whar he is noo. Let us gang awa' up to the Vicar's, and gan *him* come down, and talk wi' him."

"Hoity toity, man—you're too easy scared," said the landlord, pale enough by this time. "'Twould be a fine thing, truly, to send abroad that the house was haunted by the deaul himsel'! Why, 'twould be the ruin o' the George. You're sure ye locked the door on the corpse?"

"Aye, sir—sartain."

"Come wi' me, Tom—we'll gi' a last look round the yard."

So, side by side, with many a jealous look right and left, and over their shoulders, they went in silence. On entering the old-fashioned quadrangle, surrounded by stables and other offices—built in the antique cage-work fashion—they stopped for a while under the shadow of the inn gable, and looked round the yard, and listened. All was silent—nothing stirring.

The stable lantern was lighted; and with it in his hand Tony Turnbull, holding Tom Scales by the shoulder, advanced. He hauled Tom after him for a step or two; then stood still and shoved him before him for a step or two more; and thus cautiously—as a pair of skirmishers under fire—they approached the coach-house door.

"There, ye see—all safe," whispered Tom, pointing to the lock, which hung—distinct in the moonlight—in its place. "Cum back, I say!"

"Cum on, say I!" retorted the landlord valorously. "It would never do to allow any tricks to be played with the chap in there"—he pointed to the coach-house door.

"The coroner here in the morning, and never a corpse to sit on!" He unlocked the padlock with these words, having handed the lantern to Tom. "Here, keck in, Tom," he continued; "ye hev the lantern—and see if all's as ye left it."

"Not me—na, not for the George and a' that's in it!" said Tom, with a shudder, sternly, as he took a step backward.

"What the—what are ye afraid on? Gi' me the lantern—it is all one: *I* will."

And cautiously, little by little, he opened the door; and, holding the lantern over his head in the narrow slit, he peeped in—frowning and pale—with one eye, as if

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he expected something to fly in his face. He closed the door without speaking, and locked it again.

"As safe as a thief in a mill," he whispered with a nod to his companion. And at that moment a harsh laugh overhead broke the silence startlingly, and set all the poultry in the yard gabbling.

"Thar he be!" said Tom, clutching the landlord's arm—"in the winda—see!"

The window of the cedar-room, up two pair of stairs, was open; and in the shadow a darker outline was visible of a man, with his elbows on the window-stone, looking down upon them.

"Look at his eyes—like two live coals!" gasped Tom.

The landlord could not see all this so sharply, being confused, and not so long-sighted as Tom.

"Time, sir," called Tony Turnbull, turning cold as he thought he saw a pair of eyes shining down redly at him—"time for honest folk to be in their beds, and asleep!"

"As sound as your sexton!" said the jeering voice from above.

"Come out of this," whispered the landlord fiercely to his hostler, plucking him hard by the sleeve.

They got into the house, and shut the door.

"I wish we were shot of him," said the landlord, with something like a groan, as he leaned against the wall of the passage. "I'll sit up, anyhow—and, Tom, you'll sit wi' me. Cum into the gun-room. No one shall steal the dead man out of my yard while I can draw a trigger."

The gun-room in the George is about twelve feet square. It projects into the stable-yard and commands a full view of the old coach-house; and, through a narrow side window, a flanking view of the back door of the inn, through which the yard is reached.

Tony Turnbull took down the blunderbuss—which was the great ordnance of the house—and loaded it with a stiff charge of pistol bullets.

He put on a great-coat which hung there, and was his covering when he went out at night, to shoot wild ducks. Tom made himself comfortable likewise. They then sat down at the window, which was open, looking into the yard, the opposite side of which was white in the brilliant moonlight.

The landlord laid the blunderbuss across his knees, and stared into the yard. His comrade stared also. The door of the gun-room was locked; so they felt tolerably secure.

An hour passed; nothing had occurred. Another. The clock struck one. The shadows had shifted a little; but still the moon shone full on the old coach-house, and the stable where the guest's horse stood.

Turnbull thought he heard a step on the back-stair. Tom was watching the back-door through

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the side window, with eyes glazing with the intensity of his stare. Anthony Turnbull, holding his breath, listened at the room door. It was a false alarm.

When he came back to the window looking into the yard:

"Hish! Look thar!" said he in a vehement whisper.

From the shadow at the left they saw the figure of the gaunt horseman, in short cloak and jack-boots, emerge. He pushed open the stable door, and led out his powerful black horse. He walked it across the front of the building till he reached the old coach-house door; and there, with its bridle on its neck, he left it standing, while he stalked to the yard gate; and, dealing it a kick with his heel, it sprang back with the rebound, shaking from top to bottom, and stood open. The stranger returned to the side of his horse; and the door which secured the corpse of the dead sexton seemed to swing slowly open of itself as he entered, and returned with the corpse in his arms, and swung it across the shoulders of the horse, and instantly sprang into the saddle.

"Fire!" shouted Tom, and bang went the blunderbuss with a stunning crack. A thousand sparrows' wings winnowed through the air from the thick ivy. The watch-dog yelled a furious bark. There was a strange ring and whistle in the air. The blunderbuss had burst to shivers right down to the very breech. The recoil rolled the inn-keeper upon his back on the floor, and Tom Scales was flung against the side of the recess of the window, which had saved him from a tumble as violent. In this position they heard the scaring laugh of the departing horseman, and saw him ride out of the gate with his ghastly burden.

What infernal object was subserved by the possession of the dead villain's body, I have not learned. But a very curious story, in which a vampire resuscitation of Crooke the sexton figures, may throw a light upon this part of the tale.

The result of Turnbull's shot at the disappearing fiend certainly justifies old Andrew Moreton's dictum, which is thus expressed in his curious work, *History of Apparitions:*

"I warn rash brands who, pretending not to fear the devil, are for using the ordinary violences with him, which affect one man from another—or with an apparition, in which they may be sure to receive some mischief. I knew one fired a gun at an apparition, and the gun burst in a hundred pieces in his hand; another struck at an apparition with a sword, and broke his sword in pieces and wounded his hand grievously; and 'tis next to madness for anyone to go that way to work with any spirit, be it angel or be it devil."

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Last month you read of the first successful landing on the moon, in a cooperative expedition of the British spaceship Endeavour, *the American* Goddard *and the Russian* Ziolkovski. *Now the captain of the* Endeavour *relates more of the party's experiences, in his happy blend of informative realism and anecdotal amusement.*

Venture to the Moon

by ARTHUR C. CLARKE

III: GREEN FINGERS

I AM VERY SORRY, NOW THAT IT'S too late, that I never got to know Vladimir Surov. As I remember him, he was a quiet little man who could understand English but couldn't speak it well enough to make conversation. Even to his colleagues, I suspect he was a bit of an enigma; whenever I went aboard the *Ziolkovski,* he would be sitting in a corner working on his notes or peering through a microscope, a man who clung to his privacy even in the tight and tiny world of a spaceship. The rest of the crew did not seem to mind his aloofness; when they spoke to him, it was clear that they regarded him with tolerant affection, as well as with respect. That was hardly surprising; the work he had done developing plants to flourish far inside the Artic Circle had already made him the most famous botanist in Russia.

The fact that the Russian expedition had taken a botanist to the Moon had caused a good deal of amusement, though it was really no odder than the fact that there were biologists on both the British and American ships. During the years before the first lunar landing, a good deal of evidence had accumulated hinting that some form of vegetation might exist on the Moon, despite its airlessness and lack of water. The President of the U.S.S.R. Academy of Science was one of the leading proponents of this theory, and being too old to make the trip himself had done the next best thing by sending Surov.

The complete absence of any such vegetation, living or fossil, in the thousand or so square miles explored by our various parties was the first big disappointment the Moon had reserved for us. Even

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those sceptics who were quite certain that no form of life could exist on the Moon would have been very glad to have been proved wrong—as of course they were, five years later, when Richards and Shannon made their astonishing discovery inside the great walled plain of Eratosthenes. But *that* revelation still lay in the future; at the time of the first landing, it seemed that Surov had come to the Moon in vain.

He did not appear unduly depressed, but kept himself as busy as the rest of the crew studying soil samples and looking after the little hydroponic farm whose pressurised transparent tubes formed a gleaming network around the *Ziolkovski*. Neither we nor the Americans had gone in for this sort of thing, having calculated that it was better to ship food from Earth than to grow it on the spot—at least until the time came to set up a permanent base. We were right, in terms of economics, but wrong, in terms of morale. The tiny air-tight greenhouses inside which Surov grew his vegetables and dwarf fruit trees were an oasis upon which we often feasted our eyes when we had grown tired of the immense desolation surrounding us.

One of the many disadvantages of being commander was that I seldom had much chance to do any active exploring; I was too busy preparing reports for Earth, checking stores, arranging programmes and duty rosters, conferring with my opposite numbers in the American and Russian ships, and trying—not always successfully—to guess what would go wrong next. As a result I sometimes did not go outside the base for two or three days at a time, and it was a standing joke that my spacesuit was a haven for moths.

Perhaps it is because of this that I can remember all my trips outside so vividly; certainly I can recall my only encounter with Surov. It was near noon, with the sun high above the southern mountains and the New Earth a barely visible thread of silver a few degrees away from it. Henderson, our geophysicist, wanted to take some magnetic readings at a series of check points a couple of miles to the east of Base. Everyone else was busy, and I was momentarily on top of my work, so we set off together on foot.

The journey was not long enough to merit taking one of the scooters, especially as the charges in the batteries were getting low. In any case, I always enjoyed walking out in the open on the Moon. It was not merely the scenery, which even at its most awe-inspiring one can grow accustomed to after a while. No—what I never tired of was the effortless, slow-motion way in which every step took me bounding over the landscape, giving me the freedom

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which before the coming of space-flight men only knew in dreams.

We had done the job and were halfway home when I noticed a figure moving across the plain about a mile to the south of us—not far, in fact, from the Russian base. I snapped my field glasses down inside my helmet and took a careful look at the other explorer. Even at close range, of course, you can't identify a man in a spacesuit, but as suits are always coded by colour and numbering that makes no practical difference.

"Who is it?" asked Henderson over the short-range radio channel to which we were both tuned.

"Blue suit, Number 3 . . . that would be Surov. But I don't understand. *He's by himself.*"

It is one of the most fundamental rules of lunar exploration that no-one goes anywhere alone on the surface of the Moon. So many accidents can happen which would be trivial if you were with a companion—but are fatal if you are by yourself. How would you manage, for example, if your spacesuit developed a slow leak in the small of the back and you couldn't put on a repair patch? That may sound funny; but it's happened.

"Perhaps his buddy has had an accident and he's going to fetch help," suggested Henderson. "Maybe we had better call him."

I shook my head. Surov was obviously in no hurry. He had been out on a trip of his own, and was making his leisurely way back to the *Ziolkovski*. It was no concern of mine if Commander Krasnin let his people go out on solo trips, though it seemed a deplorable practice. And if Surov was breaking regulations, it was equally no concern of mine to report him.

During the next two months, my men often spotted Surov making his lone way over the landscape, but he always avoided them if they got too near. I made some discreet enquiries, and found that Commander Krasnin had been forced, owing to shortage of men, to relax some of his safety rules. But I couldn't find out what Surov was up to, though I never dreamed that his Commander was equally in the dark.

It was with an "I told you so" feeling that I got Krasnin's emergency call. We had all of us had men in trouble before and had had to send out help, but this was the first time anyone had been lost and had not been able to reply when his ship had sent out the recall signal. There was a hasty radio conference, a line of action was drawn up, and search parties fanned out from each of the three ships.

Once again I was with Henderson, and it was only common sense for us to back-track along the route which we had seen Surov following. It was in what we regarded as "our" territory, quite some distance away from Surov's own ship,

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and as we scrambled up the low foothills it occurred to me for the first time that the Russian might have been doing something he wanted to keep from his colleagues. What it might be, I could not imagine.

Henderson found him, and yelled for help over his suit radio. But it was much too late; Surov was lying, face down, his deflated suit crumpled around him. He had been kneeling when something had smashed the plastic globe of his helmet; you could see how he had pitched forward and died instantaneously.

When Commander Krasnin reached us, we were still staring at the unbelievable object which Surov had been examining when he died. It was about three feet high, a leathery, greenish oval rooted to the rocks with a widespread network of tendrils. Yes—rooted; for it was a plant. A few yards away were two others, much smaller and apparently dead, since they were blackened and withered.

My first reaction was: "So there *is* life on the Moon after all!" It was not until Krasnin's voice spoke in my ears that I realised how much more marvellous was the truth.

"Poor Vladimir Ilyich!" he said. "We knew he was a genius, yet we laughed at him when he told us of his dream. So he kept his greatest work a secret. He conquered the Arctic with his hybrid wheat, but *that* was only a beginning. He has brought life to the Moon . . . and death as well."

As I stood there, in that first moment of astonished revelation, it still seemed a miracle. Today, all the world knows the history of "Surov's cactus," as it was inevitably if quite inaccurately christened, and it has lost much of its wonder. His notes have told the full story, and have described the years of experimentation which finally led him to a plant whose leathery skin would enable it to survive in vacuum, and whose far-ranging, acid-secreting roots would enable it to grow upon rocks where even lichens would be hard-put to thrive. And we have seen the realisation of the second stage of Surov's dream, for the cactus which will forever bear his name has already broken up vast areas of the lunar rock and so prepared a way for the more specialised plants which now feed every human being upon the Moon.

Krasnin bent down beside the body of his colleague and lifted it effortlessly against the low gravity. He fingered the shattered fragments of the plastic helmet, and shook his head in perplexity.

"What could have happened to him?" he said. "It almost looks as if the plant did it, but that's ridiculous."

The green enigma stood there on the no-longer barren plain, tantalising us with its promise and

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its mystery. Then Henderson, who had been silent, said slowly, as if thinking aloud:

"I believe I've got the answer; I've just remembered some of the botany I did at school. If Surov designed this plant for lunar conditions, how would he arrange for it to propagate itself? The seeds would have to be scattered over a very wide area in the hope of finding a few suitable places to grow. There are no birds or animals here to carry them, in the way that happens on Earth. I can think of only one solution—and some of our terrestrial plants have already used it."

He was interrupted by my yell. Something had hit with a resounding clang against the metal waistband of my suit. It did no damage, but it was so sudden and unexpected that it took me utterly by surprise.

The second seed lay at my feet, about the size and shape of a plum-stone. A few yards away, we found the one that had shattered Surov's helmet as he bent down. He must have known that the plant was ripe, but in his eagerness to examine it he had forgotten what that implied. I have seen a cactus throw its seed a quarter of a mile under the low lunar gravity. Surov had been shot at point-blank range by his own creation.

IV: ALL THAT GLITTERS

THIS IS REALLY COMMANDER VANdenburg's story, but he is too many millions of miles away to tell it. It concerns his geophysicist, Dr Paynter, who was generally believed to have gone to the Moon to get away from his wife.

At one time or other, we were all supposed (often by our wives) to have done just that. However, in Paynter's case, there was just enough truth to make it stick.

It was not that he disliked his wife; one could almost say the contrary. He would do anything for her, but unfortunately the things that she wanted him to do cost rather too much. She was a lady of extravagant tastes, and such ladies are advised not to marry scientists—even scientists who go to the Moon.

Mrs Paynter's weakness was for jewellery, particularly diamonds. As might be expected, this was a weakness that caused her husband a good deal of worry. Being a conscientious as well as an affectionate husband, he did not merely worry about it—he did something about it. He became one of the world's leading experts on diamonds, from the scientific rather than the commercial point of view, and probably knew more about their composition, origin and properties than any other man alive. Unfortunately, you may know a

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lot about diamonds without ever possessing any, and her husband's erudition was not something that Mrs Paynter could wear round her neck when she went to a party.

Geophysics, as I have mentioned, was Dr Paynter's real business; diamonds were merely a side-line. He had developed many remarkable surveying instruments which could probe the interior of the Earth by means of electric impulses and magnetic waves, so giving a kind of X-ray picture of the hidden strata far below. It was hardly surprising, therefore, that he was one of the men chosen to pry into the mysterious interior of the Moon.

He was quite eager to go, but it seemed to Commander Vandenburg that he was reluctant to leave Earth at this particular moment. A number of men had shown such symptoms; sometimes they were due to fears that could not be eradicated and an otherwise promising man had to be left behind. In Paynter's case, however, the reluctance was quite impersonal. He was in the middle of a big experiment—something he had been working on all his life—and he didn't want to leave Earth until it was finished. However, the First Lunar Expedition could not wait for him, so he had to leave his project in the hands of his assistants. He was continually exchanging cryptic radio messages with them, to the great annoyance of the Signals section of Space Station Three.

In the wonder of a new world waiting to be explored, Paynter soon forgot his earthly preoccupations. He would dash hither and yon over the lunar landscape on one of the neat little electric scooters the Americans had brought with them, carrying seismographs, magnetometers, gravity meters, and all the other esoteric tools of the geophysicist's trade. He was trying to learn, in a few weeks, what it had taken men hundreds of years to discover about their own planet. It was true that he had only a small sample of the Moon's 14,000,000 square miles of territory to explore, but he intended to make a thorough job of it.

From time to time he continued to get messages from his colleagues back on Earth, as well as brief but affectionate signals from Mrs P. Neither seemed to interest him very much; even when you are not so busy that you have hardly time to sleep, a quarter of a million miles puts most of one's personal affairs in a different perspective. I think that on the Moon Dr Paynter was really happy for the first time in his life; if so, he was not the only one.

Not far from our base there was a rather fine crater-pit, a great blow-hole in the lunar surface almost two miles from rim to rim. Though it was fairly close at hand,

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it was outside the normal area of our joint operations and we had been on the Moon for six weeks before Paynter led a party of three men off in one of the baby tractors to have a look at it. They disappeared from radio range over the edge of the Moon, but we weren't worried about that because if they ran into trouble they could always call Earth and get any message relayed back to us.

Paynter and his men were gone 48 hours, which is about the maximum for continuous working on the Moon even with booster drugs. At first their little expedition was quite uneventful and therefore quite unexciting; everything went according to plan. They reached the crater, inflated their pressurised igloo and unpacked their stores, took their instrument readings and then set up a portable drill to get core samples. It was while he was waiting for the drill to bring him up a nice section of the Moon that Paynter made his second great discovery. He had made his first about ten hours before, but he didn't know it yet.

Around the lip of the crater, lying where they had been thrown up by the great explosions that had convulsed the lunar landscape three hundred million years before, were immense piles of rock which must have come from many miles down in the Moon's interior. Anything he could do with his little drill, thought Paynter, could hardly compare with *this*. Unfortunately the mountain-sized geological specimens that lay all around him were not neatly arranged in their correct order; they had been scattered over the landscape, much farther than the eye could see, according to the arbitrary violence of the eruptions that had blasted them into space.

Paynter climbed over these immense slag-heaps, taking a swing at likely samples with his little hammer. Presently his colleagues heard him yell, and saw him come running back to them carrying what appeared to be a lump of rather poor quality glass. It was some time before he was sufficiently coherent to explain what all the fuss was about—and some time later still before the expedition remembered its real job and got back to work.

Vandenburg watched the returning party as it headed back to the ship. The three men didn't seem so tired as one would have expected, considering the fact that they had been on their feet for two days. Indeed, there was a certain jauntiness about their movements which even the spacesuits couldn't wholly conceal. You could see that the expedition had been a success. In that case, Paynter would have two causes for congratulation. The priority message which had just come from Earth was very cryptic, but it was clear that Paynter's work there—what-

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ever it was—had finally reached a triumphant conclusion.

Commander Vandenburg almost forgot the message when he saw what Paynter was holding in his hand. He knew what a raw diamond looked like, and this was the second largest that anyone had ever seen. Only the Cullinan, tipping the scales at 3032 carats, beat it by a slender margin. "We ought to have expected it," he heard Paynter babble happily; "diamonds are always found associated with volcanic vents. But somehow I never thought the analogy would hold here."

Vandenburg suddenly remembered the signal, and handed it over to Paynter. He read it quickly, and his jaw dropped. Never in his life, Vandenburg told me, had he seen a man so instantly deflated by a message of congratulation. The signal read: WE'VE DONE IT. TEST 541 WITH MODIFIED PRESSURE CONTAINER COMPLETE SUCCESS. NO PRACTICAL LIMIT TO SIZE. COSTS NEGLIGIBLE.

"What's the matter?" said Vandenburg, when he saw the stricken look on Paynter's face. "It doesn't seem bad news to me, whatever it means."

Paynter gulped two or three times like a stranded fish, then stared helplessly at the great crystal that almost filled the palm of his hand. He tossed it into the air, and it floated back in that slow-motion way everything has under lunar gravity.

Finally he found his voice.

"My lab's been working for years," he said, "trying to synthesise diamonds. Yesterday this thing was worth a million pounds. Today it's worth a couple of hundred. I'm not sure if I'll bother to carry it back to Earth."

Well, he *did* carry it back; it seemed a pity not to. For about three months, Mrs P. had the finest diamond necklace in the world, worth every bit of five hundred pounds—mostly the cost of cutting and polishing. Then the Paynter Process went into commercial production, and a month later she got her divorce. The grounds were extreme mental cruelty; and I suppose you could say it was justified.

Next month, F&SF will conclude this series of lunar glimpses with the story of the greatest advertising coup *in history . . . and the unofficial private reason for the return of the British expedition two weeks after the others.*

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Ghosts for Christmas: II

John Dickson Carr is avowedly a disciple of Le Fanu and M. R. James; and though he has never written a simple forthright ghost story, the supernatural keeps looming darkly in his tales of detection. Even when he evokes ghostly elements only to dispel them by rational logic, as in THE THREE COFFINS *or* THE CROOKED HINGE, *he can chill the least sensitive reader into looking apprehensively over his shoulder; and sometimes Mr. Carr chooses not to dispel the horrors he evokes . . . as in* THE BURNING COURT, *or in* Blind Man's Hood (*F&SF, January, 1955*), *or in*

New Murders for Old

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

HARGREAVES DID NOT SPEAK UNTIL he had turned on two lamps. Even then he did not remove his overcoat. The room, though cold, was stuffy, and held a faintly sweet odour. Outside the Venetian blinds, which were not quite closed, you saw the restless, shifting presence of snow past street-lights. For the first time, Hargreaves hesitated.

"The—the object," he explained, indicating the bed, "was there. *He* came in by this door, here. Perhaps you understand a little better now?"

Hargreaves' companion nodded.

"No," said Hargreaves, and smiled. "I'm not trying to invoke illusions. On the contrary, I am trying to dispel them. Shall we go downstairs?"

It was a tall, heavy house, where no clocks ticked. But the treads of the stairs creaked and cracked sharply, even under their padding of carpet. At the back, in a kind of small study, a gas-fire had been lighted. Its hissing could be heard from a distance; it roared up blue, like solid blue flames, into the white fretwork of the heater; but it did little to dispel the chill of the room. Hargreaves motioned his companion to a chair at the other side of the fire.

"I want to tell you about it," he went on. "Don't think I'm trying to be"— his wrist hesitated over a word, as though over a chess-piece—"highbrow. Don't think I'm trying to be highbrow if I tell it to you"—again his wrist hesi-

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tated—"objectively. As though you knew nothing about it. As though you weren't concerned in it. It's the only way you will understand the problem he had to face."

Hargreaves was very intent when he said this. He was bending forward, looking up from under his eyebrows; his heavy overcoat flopped over the sides of his knees, and his gloved hands, seldom still, either made a slight gesture or pressed flat on his knees.

"Take Tony Marvell, to begin with," he argued. "A good fellow, whom everybody liked. Not a good business man, perhaps: too generous to be a good business man; but as conscientious as the very devil, and with so fine a mathematical brain that he got over the practical difficulties.

"Tony was Senior Wrangler at Cambridge, and intended to go on with his mathematics. But then his uncle died, so he had to take over the business. You know what the business was then: three luxury hotels, built, equipped and run by Old Jim, the uncle, in Old Jim's most flamboyant style: all going to rack and ruin.

"Everybody said it was madness for Tony to push his shoulder up against the business world. His brother—that's Stephen Marvell, the former surgeon—said Tony would only bring Old Jim's cardhouses down on everybody and swamp them all with more debts. But you know what happened. At twenty-five, Tony took over the business. At twenty-seven, he had the hotels on a paying basis. At thirty, they were hotels to which everybody went as a matter of course: blazing their sky-signs, humming with efficiency, piling up profits which startled even Tony.

"And all because he sneered at the idea that there could be any such thing as overwork. He never let up. You can imagine that dogged expression of his: 'Well, I don't like this work, but let's clean it up satisfactorily so that we can get on to more important things'—like his studies. He did it partly because he had promised Old Jim he would, and partly *because* (you see?) he thought the business so unimportant that he wanted to show how easy it was. But it wasn't easy. No man could stand that pace. London, Brighton, Eastbourne; he knew everything there was to know about the Marvell Hotels, down to the price of a pillow-case and the cost of grease for the lifts. At the end of the fifth year he collapsed one morning in his office. His brother Stephen told him what he had to do.

"'You're getting out of this,' Stephen said. 'You're going clear away. Round the world, anywhere, but for six or eight months at the shortest time. During that time, you're not even so much as to think of your work. Is that clear?'

"Tony told me the story himself last night. He says that the whole

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thing might never have happened if he had not been forbidden to write to anybody while he was away.

"'Not even so much as a post-card,' snapped Stephen, 'to anybody. If you do, it'll be more business; and then God help you.'

"'But Judith——' Tony protested.

"'Particularly to Judith,' said Stephen. 'If you insist on marrying your secretary, that's your affair. But you don't ruin your rest-cure by exchanging long letters about the hotels.'

"You can imagine Stephen's over-aristocratic, thin-nosed face towering over him, dull with anger. You can imagine Stephen in his black coat and striped trousers, standing up beside the polished desk of his office in Harley Street. Stephen Marvell (and, to a certain extent, Tony, too) had that over-bred air which Old Jim Marvell had always wanted and never achieved.

"Tony did not argue. He was willing enough, because he was tired. Even if he were forbidden to write to Judith, he could always think about her. In the middle of September, more than eight months ago, he sailed by the *Queen Anne* from Southampton. And on that night the terrors began."

Hargreaves paused. The gas-fire still hissed in the little, dim study. You would have known that this was a house in which death had occurred, and occurred recently, by the look on the face of Hargreaves' companion. He went on:

"The *Queen Anne* sailed at midnight. Tony saw her soaring up above the docks, as high as the sky. He saw the long decks, white and shiny like shoe-boxes, gleaming under skeins of lights; he saw the black dots of passengers moving along them; he heard the click-rattle-rush of winches as great cranes swung over the crowd on the docks; and he felt the queer, pleasurable, restless feeling which stirs the nerves at the beginning of an ocean voyage.

"At first he was as excited as a schoolboy. Stephen Marvell and Judith Gates, Tony's fiancée, went down to Southampton with him. Afterwards he recalled talking to Judith; holding her arm, piloting her through the rubbery-smelling passages of the ship to show her how fine it was. They went to Tony's cabin, where his luggage had been piled together with a basket of fruit. Everybody agreed that it was a fine cabin.

"It was not until a few minutes before the 'all-ashore' gong that the first pang of loneliness struck him. Stephen and Judith had already gone ashore, for all of them disliked these awkward, last-minute leave-takings. They were standing on the dock, far below. By leaning over the rail of the ship he could just see them. Judith's face was tiny, remote and smiling; infinitely

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loved. She was waving to him. Round him surged the crowd; faces, hats, noise under naked lights, accentuating the break with home and the water that would widen between. Next he heard the gong begin to bang: hollow, quivering, pulsing to loudness over the cry: 'All ashore that's going ashore!'; and dying away in the ship. He did not want to go. There was still plenty of time. He could still gather up his luggage and get off.

"For a time he stood by the rail, with the breeze from Southampton Water in his face. Such a notion was foolish. He would stay. With a last wave to Judith and Stephen, he drew himself determinedly away. He would be sensible. He would go below and unpack his things. Feeling the unreality of that hollow night, he went down to his cabin on C Deck. And his luggage was not there! He stared round the stuffy cabin with its neat curtains at the portholes. There had been a trunk and two suit-cases, gaudily labelled, to say nothing of the basket of fruit. Now the cabin was empty.

"Tony ran upstairs again to the purser's office. The purser, a harassed man behind a kind of ticket-window desk, was just getting rid of a clamouring crowd. In the intervals of striking a hand-bell and calling orders, he caught Tony's eye.

" 'My luggage——' Tony said.

" 'That's all right, Mr. Marvell,' said the harassed official. 'It's being taken ashore. But you'd better hurry yourself.'

"Tony had here only a feeling of extreme stupidity. 'Taken ashore?' he said. 'But why? Who told you to send it ashore?'

" 'Why, *you* did,' said the purser, looking up suddenly from a sheet of names and figures.

"Tony only looked at him.

" 'You came here,' the purser went on, with sharply narrowing eyes, 'not ten minutes ago. You said you had decided not to take the trip, and asked for your luggage to be taken off. I told you that at this late date we could not of course, refund the——'

" 'Get it back!' said Tony. His voice sounded wrong. 'I couldn't have told you that. Get it back!'

" 'Just as you like, sir,' said the purser, smiting on the bell, '*if* there's time.'

"Overhead the hoarse blast of the whistle, that mournfullest of all sounds at sea, beat out against Southampton Water. B Deck, between open doors, was cold and gusty.

"Now Tony Marvell had not the slightest recollection of having spoken to the purser before. That was what struck him between the eyes like a blow, and what, for the moment, almost drove him to run away from the *Queen Anne* before they should lift the gangplank. It was the nightmare again.

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One of the worst features of his nervous breakdown had been the conviction, coming in flashes at night, that he was not real any longer; that his body and his inner self had moved apart, the first walking or talking in everyday life like an articulate dummy, while the brain remained in another place. It was as though he were dead, and seeing his body move. Dead.

"To steady his wits, he tried to concentrate on familiar human things. Judith, for instance; he recalled Judith's hazel eyes, the soft line of her cheek as she turned her head, the paper cuffs she wore at the office. Judith, his fiancée, his secretary, who would take care of things while he was away; whom he loved, and who was so maddeningly close even now. But he must not think of Judith. Instead, he pictured his brother Stephen, and Johnny Cleaver, and any other friends who occurred to him. He even thought of Old Jim Marvell, who was dead. And—so strong is the power of imaginative visualisation—at that moment, in the breezy lounge-room facing the purser's office, he thought he saw Old Jim looking at him round the corner of a potted palm.

"All this, you understand, went through Tony's mind in the brief second while he heard the ship's whistle hoot out over his head.

"He made some excuse to the purser, and went below. He was grateful for the chatter of noise, for the people passing up and down below decks. None of them paid any attention to him, but at least they were there. But, when he opened the door of his cabin, he stopped and stood very still in the doorway.

"The propellers had begun to churn. A throb, a heavy vibration, shook upwards through the ship; it made the tooth-glass tinkle in the rack, and sent a series of creaks through the bulkheads. The *Queen Anne* was moving. Tony Marvell took hold of the door as though that movement had been a lurch, and he stared at the bed across the cabin. On the white bedspread, where it had not been before, lay an automatic pistol."

The gas-fire had heated its asbestos pillars to glowing red. Again there was a brief silence in the little study of the house in St. John's Wood. Hargreaves—Sir Charles Hargreaves, Assistant Commissioner of Police for the Criminal Investigation Department—leaned down and lowered the flame of the heater. Even the tone of his voice seemed to change when the gas ceased its loud hissing.

"Wait!" he said, lifting his hand. "I don't want you to get the wrong impression. Don't think that the fear, the slow approach of what was going to happen pursued Tony all through his trip round the world. It didn't. That's the most curious part of it all.

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"Tony has told me that it was a brief, bad bout, lasting perhaps fifteen minutes in all, just before and just after the *Queen Anne* sailed. It was not alone the uncanny feeling that things had ceased to be real. It was a sensation of active malignancy—of hatred, of danger, of what you like—surrounding him and pressing on him. He could feel it like a weak current from a battery.

"But five minutes after the ship had headed out to open sea, every such notion fell away from him. It was as though he had emerged out of an evil fog. That hardly seems reasonable. Even supposing that there are evil emanations, or evil spirits, it is difficult to think that they are confined to one country; that their tentacles are broken by half a mile's distance; that they cannot cross water. Yet there it was. One moment he was standing there with the automatic pistol in his hand, the noise of the engines beating in his ears and a horrible impulse joggling his elbow to put the muzzle of the pistol into his mouth and—

"Then—snap! Something broke: that is the only way he can describe it. He stood upright. He felt like a man coming out of a fever, shaken and sweating, but back from behind the curtain into the real world again. He gulped deep breaths. He went to the porthole and opened it. From that time on, he says, he began to get well.

"How the automatic had got into his cabin he did not know. He knew he must have brought it himself, in one of those blind flashes. But he could not remember. He stared at it with new eyes, and new feeling of the beauty and sweetness of life. He felt as though he had been reprieved from execution.

"You might have thought that he would have flung the pistol overboard in sheer fear of touching it. But he didn't. To him it was the part of a puzzle. He stared much at it: a Browning .38, of Belgian manufacture, fully loaded. After the first few days, when he did keep it locked away out of sight in his trunk, he pondered over it. It represented the one piece of evidence he could carry home with him, the one tangible reality in a nightmare.

"At the New York customs-shed it seemed to excite no surprise. He carried it overland with him—Cleveland, Chicago, Salt Lake City—to San Francisco, in a fog, and then down the kindled sea to Honolulu. At Yokohama they were going to take it away from him; only a huge bribe retrieved it. Afterward he carried it on his person, and was never searched. As the broken bones of his nerves knitted, as in the wash of the propellers there was peace, it became a kind of Mascot. It went with him through the blistering heat of the Indian Ocean, into the murky Red

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Sea, to the Mediterranean. To Port Said, to Cairo in early winter. To Naples and Marseilles and Gibraltar. It was tucked away in his hip-pocket on the bitter cold night, a little more than eight months after his departure, when Tony Marvell —a healed man again—landed back at Southampton in the S.S. *Chippenham Castle*.

"It was snowing that night, you remember? The boat-train roared through the thickening snow. It was crowded, and the heat would not work.

"Tony knew that there could be nobody at Southampton to meet him. His itinerary had been laid out in advance, and he had stuck to the bitter letter of his instructions about not writing even so much as a postcard. But he had altered the itinerary, so as to take a ship that would get him home in time for Christmas; he would burst in on them a week early. For eight months he had lived in a void. In an hour or two he would be home. He would see Judith.

"In the dimly lighted compartment of the train, his fellow-passengers were not talkative. The long voyage had squeezed their conversation dry; they almost hated each other. Even the snow roused only a flicker of enthusiasm.

"'Real old-fashioned Christmas!' said one.

"'Hah!' said another appreciatively, scratching with his finger-nails at the frosted window.

"'Damn cold, I call it,' snarled a third. 'Can't they ever make the heat work in these trains? I'm damn well going to make a complaint!'

"After that, with a sympathetic grunt or mutter, each retired behind his newspaper; a white, blank wall which rustled occasionally, and behind which they drank up news of home.

"In other words (Tony remembers that he thought then), he was in England again. He was home. For himself, he only pretended to read. He leaned back in his seat, listening vaguely to the clackety-roar of the wheels, and the long blast of the whistle that was torn behind as the train gathered speed.

"He knew exactly what he would do. It would be barely ten o'clock when they reached Waterloo. He would jump into a cab, and hurry home—to this house—for a wash and brush-up. Then he would pelt up to Judith's flat at Hampstead as hard as he could go. Yet this thought, which should have made him glow, left him curiously chilly round the heart. He fought the chill. He laughed at himself. Determinedly he opened the newspaper, distracting himself, turning from page to page, running his eye down each column. Then he stopped. Something familiar caught his eye, some familiar name. It was an obscure item on a middle page.

"He was reading in this paper

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the news of his own death. Just that.

"'Mr. Anthony Dean Marvell, of Upper Avenue Road, St. John's Wood, and owner of Marvell Hotels, Ltd., was found shot dead last night in his bedroom at home. A bullet had penetrated up through the roof of the mouth into the brain, and a small-calibre automatic was in his hand. The body was found by Mrs. Reach, Mr. Marvell's housekeeper, who . . .'

"A suicide!

"And once again, as suddenly as it had left him aboard ship, the grasp fell on him, shutting him off from the real world into the unreal. The compartment, as I told you, was very dimly lighted. So it was perhaps natural that he could only dimly see a blank wall of upheld newspapers facing him; as though there were no fellow-passengers there, as though they had deserted him in a body, leaving only the screen of papers that jiggled a little with the rush of the train.

"Yes, he was alone.

"He got up blindly, dragging open the door of the compartment to get out into the corridor. The confined space seemed to be choking him. Holding his own newspaper up high, so as to catch the light from the compartment, he read the item again.

"There could be no possibility of a mistake. The account was too detailed. It told all about him, his past and present . . .

"'. . . His brother, Mr. Stephen Marvell, the eminent Harley Street surgeon, was hurriedly summoned. . . . His fiancée, Miss Judith Gates . . . It is understood that in September Mr. Marvell suffered a nervous breakdown, from which even a long rest had not effected a cure. . . .'

"Tony looked at the date of the newspaper, afraid of what he might see. But it was the date of that day: the twenty-third of December. From this account, it appeared that he had shot himself forty-eight hours before. And the gun was in his hip-pocket now.

"Tony folded up the newspaper. The train moved under his feet with a dancing sway, jerking above the click of the wheels; and another thin blast of the whistle went by. It reminded him of the whistle aboard the *Queen Anne*. He glanced along the dusky corridor. It was empty except for someone, whom he supposed to be another passenger, leaning elbows on the rail past the windows and staring out at the flying snow.

"He remembers nothing else until the train reached Waterloo. But something—an impression, a subconscious memory—registered in his mind about that passenger he had seen in the corridor. First it had to do with the shape of the

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person's shoulders. Then Tony realized that this was because the person was wearing a greatcoat with an old-fashioned brown fur collar. He was jumping blindly out of the train at Waterloo when he remembered that Old Jim Marvell always used to wear such a collar.

"After that he seemed to see it everywhere.

"When he hurried up to the guard's van to claim his trunk and suitcase, the luggage-ticket in his hand, he was in such a crowd that he could not move his arms. But he thought he felt brown fur press the back of his shoulders.

"A porter got him a taxi. It was a relief to see a London cab again, in a coughing London terminus, and hear the bump of the trunk as it went up under the strap, and friendly voices again. He gave the address to the driver, tipped the porter, and jumped inside. Even so, the porter seemed to be holding open the door of the taxi longer than was necessary.

"'Close it, man!' Tony found himself shouting. 'Close it, quick!'

"'Yessir,' said the porter, jumping back. The door slammed. Afterwards, the porter stood and stared after the taxi. Tony, glancing out through the little back window, saw him still standing there.

"It was dark in the cab, and as close as though a photographer's black hood had been drawn over him. Tony could see little. But he carefully felt with his hands all over the seat, all over the open space; and he found nothing."

At this point in the story, Hargreaves broke off for a moment or two. He had been speaking with difficulty; not as though he expected to be doubted, but as though the right words were hard to find. His gloved fingers opened and closed on his knee.

For the first time his companion—Miss Judith Gates—interrupted him. Judith spoke from the shadow on the other side of the gas-fire.

"Wait!" she said. "Please!"

"Yes?" said Hargreaves.

"This person who was following Tony." She spoke also with difficulty. "You aren't telling me that it was—well, was—?"

"Was what?"

"Dead," said Judith.

"I don't know who it was," answered Hargreaves, looking at her steadily. "Except that it seemed to be somebody with a fur collar on his coat. I'm telling you Tony's story, which I believe."

Judith's hand shaded her eyes. "All the same," she insisted, and her pleasant voice went high, "even supposing it was! I mean, even supposing it was the person you think. *He* of all people, living or dead, wouldn't have tried to put any evil influence round Tony. Old Jim loved Tony. He left Tony every penny he owned, and not a

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farthing to Stephen. He always told Tony he'd look after him."

"And so he did," said Hargreaves.

"But—"

"You see," Hargreaves told her slowly. "You still don't understand the source of the evil influence. Tony didn't, himself. All he knew was that he was bowling along in a dark taxi, through slippery, snowy streets; and whatever might be following him, good or bad, he couldn't endure it.

"Even so, everything might have ended well if the taxi-driver had been careful. But he wasn't. That was the first snowfall of the year, and the driver miscalculated. When they were only two hundred yards from Upper Avenue Road, he tried to take a turn too fast. Tony felt the helpless swing of the skid; he saw the glass partition tilt, and a black tree-trunk rush up huge at them until it exploded against the outer windscreen. They landed upright against the tree, with a buckled wheel.

"'I *'ad* to swerve,' the driver was crying. 'I *'ad* to! An old gent with a fur collar walked smack out in front of—'

"And so, you see, Tony had to walk home alone.

"He knew something was following him before he had taken half a dozen steps. Two hundred yards don't sound like a great distance. First right, first left, and you're home. But here it seemed to stretch out interminably, as such things do in dreams. He did not want to leave the taxi-driver. The driver thought this was because Tony doubted his honesty about bringing the luggage on when the wheel was repaired. But it was not that.

"For the first part of the way, Tony walked rapidly. The other thing walked at an equal pace behind him. By the light of a street-lamp Tony could see the wet fur collar on the coat, but nothing else. Afterwards he increased his pace to what was almost a run; and, though no difference could be seen in the gait of what was behind him, it was still there. Unlike you, Tony didn't wonder whether it might be good or evil. These nice differences don't occur to you when you're dealing with something that may be dead. All he knew was that he mustn't let it *identify* itself with him or he was done for.

"Then it began to gain on him, and he ran.

"The pavement was black, the snow dirty grey. He saw the familiar turning, where front gardens were built up above the low, stone walls; he saw the street sign fastened to one of those corners, white lettering on black; and, in sudden blind panic, he plunged for the steps that led up to his home.

"The house was dark. He got

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the cold keys out of his pocket, but the key-ring slipped round in his fingers, like soap in bath-water, and fell on the tiled floor of the vestibule. He groped after it in the dark—just as the thing turned in at the gate. In fact, Tony heard the gate creak. He found the keys, found the lock by a miracle, and opened the door.

"But he was too late, because the other thing was already coming up the front steps. Tony says that at close range, against a street-lamp, the fur collar looked more wet and moth-eaten; that is all he can describe. He was in a dark hall with the door open. Even familiar things had fled his wits and he could not remember the position of the light-switch.

"The other person walked in.

"In his hip-pocket, Tony remembered, he still had the weapon he had carried round the world. He fumbled under his overcoat to get the gun out of his pocket; but even that weak gesture was no good to him, for he dropped the gun on the carpet. Since the visitor was now within six feet of him, he did not stop. He bolted up the stairs.

"At the top of the stairs he risked a short glance down. The other thing had stopped. In faint bluish patches of light which came through the open front door, Tony could see that it was stooping down to pick up the automatic pistol from the carpet.

"Tony thinks—now—that he began to switch on lights in the upper hall. Also, he shouted something. He was standing before the door of his bedroom. He threw open this door, blundered in, and began to turn on more lamps. He had got two lamps lighted before he turned to look at the bed, which was occupied.

"The man on the bed did not, however, sit up at the coming of noise or lights. A sheet covered him from head to feet; and even under the outline of the sheet you could trace the line of the wasted, sunken features. Tony Marvell then did what was perhaps the most courageous act of his life. He had to know. He walked across and turned down the upper edge of the sheet, and looked down at his own face; a dead face, turned sightlessly up from the bed.

"Shock? Yes. But more terror? No. For this dead man was real, he was flesh and blood—as Tony was flesh and blood. He looked exactly like Tony. But it was now no question of a real world and an unreal world; it was no question of going mad. This man was real; and that meant fraud and imposture.

"A voice from across the room said: '*So you're alive!*' And Tony turned round, to find his brother Stephen standing in the doorway.

"Stephen wore a red dressing-gown, hastily pulled round him, and his hair was tousled. His face was one of collapse.

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"'I didn't mean to do it!' Stephen was crying out at him. Even though Tony did not understand, he felt that the words were a confession of guilt; they were babbling words, words which made you pity the man who said them.

"'I never really meant to have you killed aboard that ship,' said Stephen. 'It was all a joke. You know I wouldn't have hurt you; you know that, don't you? Listen—'

"Now Stephen (as I said) was standing in the doorway, clutching his dressing-gown round him. What made him look round towards the hall behind, quickly, Tony did not know. Perhaps he heard a sound behind him. Perhaps he saw something out of the corner of his eye. But Stephen did look round, and he began to scream.

"Tony saw no more, for the light in the hall went out. The fear was back on him again, and he could not move. For he saw a hand. It was only, so to speak, the flicker of a hand. This hand darted in from the darkness out in the hall; it caught hold of the knob on the bedroom door, and closed the door. It turned a key on the outside, locking Tony into the room. It kept Stephen outside in the dark hall—and Stephen was still screaming.

"A good thing, too, that Tony had been locked in the room. That saved trouble with the police later.

"The rest of the testimony comes from Mrs. Reach, the housekeeper. Her room was next door to Stephen's bedroom, at the end of the upstairs hall. She was awakened by screams, by what seemed to be thrashing sounds, and the noise of hard breathing. These sounds passed her door towards Stephen's room.

"Just as she was getting out of her bed and putting on a dressing-gown, she heard Stephen's door close. Just as she went out into the hall, she heard, for the second time in forty-eight hours, the noise of a pistol-shot.

"Now, Mrs. Reach will testify in a coroner's court that nobody left, or could have left Stephen's room after the shot. She was looking at the door, though it was several minutes before she could screw up enough courage to open the door. When she did open it, all sounds had ceased. He had been shot through the right temple at close range; presumably by himself, since the weapon was discovered in a tangle of stained bed-clothing. There was nobody else in the room, and all the windows were locked on the inside. The only other thing Mrs. Reach noticed was an unpleasant, an intensely unpleasant smell of mildewed cloth and wet fur."

Again Hargreaves paused. It seemed that he had come to the

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end of the story. An outsider might have thought, too, that he had emphasised these horrors too much, for the girl across from him kept her hands pressed against her eyes. But Hargreaves knew his business.

"Well?" he said gently. "You see the explanation, don't you?"

Judith took her hands away from her eyes. "Explanation?"

"The natural explanation," repeated Hargreaves, spacing his words. "Tony Marvell is not going mad. He never had any brain-storms or 'blind flashes.' He only thought he had. The whole thing was a cruel and murderous fake, engineered by Stephen, and it went wrong. But if it had succeeded, Stephen Marvell would have committed a very nearly perfect murder."

The relief he saw flash across Judith's face, the sudden dazed catching at hope, went to Hargreaves' heart. But he did not show this.

"Let's go back eight months," he went on, "and take it from the beginning. Now, Tony is a very wealthy young man. The distinguished Stephen, on the other hand, was swamped with debts and always on the thin edge of bankruptcy. If Tony were to die, Stephen, the next of kin, would inherit the whole estate. So Stephen decided that, if he was to continue living himself, Tony had to die.

"But Stephen, a medical man, knew the risks of murder. No matter how cleverly you plan it, there is always *some* suspicion; and Stephen was bound to be suspected. He was unwilling to risk those prying detectives, those awkward questions, those damning post-mortem reports—until, more than eight months ago, he suddenly saw how he could destroy Tony without the smallest suspicion attaching to himself.

"In St. Jude's Hospital, where he did some charity work, Stephen had found a broken-down ex-schoolmaster named Rupert Hayes. Every man in this world, they say, has his exact double. Hayes was Tony's double to the slightest feature. He was, in fact, so uncannily like Tony that the very sight of him made Stephen flinch. Now, Hayes was dying of tuberculosis. He had, at most, not more than a year to live. He would be eager to listen to any scheme which would allow him to spend the rest of his life in luxury, and die of natural causes in a soft bed. To him Stephen explained the trick.

"Tony should be ordered off—apparently—on a trip round the world. On the night he was to sail, Tony should be allowed to go aboard.

"Hayes should be waiting aboard that same ship, with a gun in his pocket. After Stephen or any other friends had left the ship conveniently early, Hayes should entice Tony up to the dark boat-deck.

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Then he was to shoot Tony through the head, and drop the body overboard.

"Haven't you ever realized that a giant ocean-liner, just before it leaves port, is the ideal place to commit a murder? Not a soul will remember you afterwards. The passengers notice nothing; they are too excited. The crew notice nothing; they are kept too busy. The confusion of the crowd is intense. And what happens to your victim after he goes overboard? He will be sucked under and presently caught by the terrible propellers, to make him unrecognizable. When a body is found—if it is found at all—it will be presumed to be some dock-roisterer. Certainly it will never be connected with the ocean-liner, because there will be nobody missing from the liner's passenger list.

"Missing from the passenger list? Of course not! Hayes, you see, was to go to the purser and order Tony's luggage to be sent ashore. He was to say he was cancelling the trip, and not going after all. After killing Tony he was then to walk ashore as—"

The girl uttered an exclamation.

Hargreaves nodded. "You see it now. He was to walk ashore *as Tony*. He was to say to his friends that he couldn't face the journey after all; and everybody would be happy. Why not? The real Tony was within an ace of doing just that.

"Then, Hayes, well coached, would simply settle down to play the part of Tony for the rest of his natural life. Mark that: his natural life; a year at most. He would be too ill to attend to the business, of course. He wouldn't even see you, his fiancée, too often. If ever he made any bad slips, that, of course, would be his bad nerves. He would be allowed to 'develop' lung trouble. At the end of a year, amid sorrowing friends . . .

"Stephen had planned brilliantly. 'Murder'? What do you mean, murder? Let the doctors examine as much as they like! Let the police ask what questions they like! Whatever steps are taken, Stephen Marvell is absolutely safe. For the poor devil in bed really has died a natural death.

"Only—well, it went wrong. Hayes wasn't cut out to be a murderer. I hadn't the favour of his acquaintance, but he must have been a decent sort. He promised to do this. But, when it came to the actual fact, he couldn't force himself to kill Tony: literally, physically couldn't. He threw away his pistol and ran. On the other hand, once off the ship, he couldn't confess to Stephen that Tony was still alive. He couldn't give up that year of sweet luxury, with all Tony's money at his disposal to soothe his aching lungs. So he pretended to Stephen that he had done the job, and Stephen danced for joy. But Hayes, as the months

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went on, did not dance. He knew Tony wasn't dead. He knew there would be a reckoning soon. And he couldn't let it end like that. A week before he thought Tony was coming home, after writing a letter to the police to explain everything, Hayes shot himself rather than face exposure."

There was a silence. "That, I think," Hargreaves said quietly, "explains everything about Tony."

Judith Gates bit her lips. Her pretty face was working; and she could not control the twitching of her capable hands. For a moment she seemed to be praying.

"Thank God!" she murmured. "I was afraid—"

"Yes," said Hargreaves; "I know."

"But it still doesn't explain everything. It—"

Hargreaves stopped her.

"I said," he pointed out, "that it explains everything about Tony. That's all you need worry about. Tony is free. You are free. As for Stephen Marvell's death, it was suicide. That is the official record."

"But that's absurd!" cried Judith. "I didn't like Stephen; I always knew he hated Tony; but he wasn't one to kill himself, even if he were exposed. Don't you see, you haven't explained the one real horror? I must know. I mean, I must know if you think what I think about it. Who was the man with the brown fur collar? Who followed Tony home that night? Who stuck close by him, to keep the evil influences off him? Who was his guardian? Who shot Stephen in revenge?"

Sir Charles Hargreaves looked down at the sputtering gas-fire. His face, inscrutable, was wrinkled in sharp lines from mouth to nostril. His brain held many secrets. He was ready to lock away this one, once he knew that they understood each other.

"You tell me," he said.

Help Fight TB

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Back in the early days of F&SF we featured a Bureau of Imaginary Zoology, which brought to your attention such extraordinary creatures as the gnurr, *the* hurkle *and the* golen. *Unfortunately the past couple of years have revealed few such strange beings; but now Gordon Dickson helps to fill the gap with the simultaneous discovery of two alien beasts: the* pid *and the* illobar—*a discovery related in one of the rarest and happiest forms of science fiction, a genuinely funny adventure story.*

Rescue Mission

by GORDON R. DICKSON

"LOOK, ARCHIE," SAID JIM TIMBERlake, squinting through a gap between the heavy logs of the pen. "Here comes the medicine man now."

Archie Swenson looked. He was a dark, thin, gloomy sort of person at best and right now he looked even gloomier than usual.

"I don't like the expression on his face," he said, ominously.

Both men hurriedly adjusted their translators, microphone against the throat, earphones snugly in place on the ears, and watched as the burly, green-skinned guard hauled back on the gate to the pen and let the shaman in. He was a wiry old fellow, faded by age to a soft chartreuse. He carried a long dagger at his waist, an inflated animal bladder in one hand, and had several minor bones stuck through his frizzled gray topknot. Aside from this, he was unadorned and, with his sagging potbelly, made an unlovely sight.

"Greetings, devils," he said cheerfully, the translators duly rendering sense from his language of grunts and clicks.

"I've told you," said Timberlake, his square sunburned countenance turning, if possible, even a little redder at this, "we're not devils, you idiot. We're human beings, just like you. We had the same common ancestors. Your people just happened to get forgotten here on this world long enough to adapt physically and—"

"My dear fellow, of course, of course," interrupted the shaman, waving his bladder gracefully. "I don't doubt you in the least. But what an upset there would be here if I agreed with you. After all, Rome wasn't built in a day."

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"You admit knowing about Rome!" cried Timberlake.

"It's one of our most cherished legends," soothed the shaman. "Now, to get down to business—"

In desperation, Timberlake threw back his shoulders, wishing he had Swenson's height along with his own muscles, and turned the volume of the translator up to full.

"I DEMAND YOU RELEASE US IMMEDIATELY!"

"My, my," said the shaman, admiringly. "You must show me how to work that gadget one of these days—whichever one of you is still around."

"What do you mean—whichever one of us is still around?" quavered Swenson, apprehensively.

"Well, the council's finally come to a decision on you—"

"With your advice," growled Timberlake.

"I must admit my voice was not unheard in the matter . . . at any rate, the matter has been thrashed out, taking into due account that when you two devils landed here in your devilish spaceship, you stated that you were on a mission to rescue some other devils. Now, the problem that faced the council—a nice point, I can tell you—was whether to let you go, rather than risk the bad luck attendant on frustrating devils, or to boil you slowly in oil as a warning to other devils who might want to trespass."

Swenson gulped.

"The council, caught on the horns of a dilemma, as it were, finally has come up with a decision worthy of the legendary Solomon. To-wit: one of you will be turned loose, and the other boiled, shortly, on the evening of the full moon."

This time Swenson did not manage to gulp. He seemed paralyzed. It was Timberlake who gulped.

"Which—one of us goes?" he managed to say.

The shaman gracefully circled his animal bladder through the air and pointed it at Swenson.

"Iggle—" he said.

Swenson sagged at the knees.

"Biggle—" he continued, switching the bladder to point at Timberlake, who was frantically juggling with the translator controls. The words must be nonsense syllables, for no meaning was coming through.

"—tiggle rawg—" the shaman was continuing, alternating the direction of his bladder with each word. "Jaby oogi siggle blawg. Ibber jobi naber sawg. Iggle, biggle, tiggle rawg. And out—go—*you!*" The bladder ended up pointing at Swenson, who turned white. "Congratulations," said the shaman to Timberlake. "You seem to have been chosen to accomplish your mission. The two devils you seek are about half a day's march away. Go straight down the valley and turn right at the red mountain."

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Two guards came in through the door of the pen at the shaman's signal and began to hustle Swenson out.

"Wait!" he cried, thinking of the gun rack in the control room. "I've got to get something from my ship—"

"Ah, that . . . no," said the shaman, regretfully. "We may be somewhat provincial around here, but we have elementary common sense. You'll have to make out just as you are, devil. Now, it's no use fighting. Guards, maybe you'd better tap him on the head until you can carry him to the boundary line."

Timberlake sat nursing an aching head, some half an hour later, on a pleasant hillside from which he could look back along the green valley to the log palisade of the village he had just been thrown out of. He had carefully checked over the equipment in his helmet, but it seemed unharmed by the blow from the guard's club. Carefully, he set the controls on radio.

"Swenson? Archie?" he said, pressing the mike tight against his throat. "Archie, can you hear me?"

"I can hear you," replied a hollow voice that seemed to echo from the uttermost depths of despair.

"Cheer up—" began Timberlake —and snatched off the earphones. Holding them at arm's length until Swenson was through, he heard the voice die down and put them on again. "Archie," he said, reproachfully, "I don't blame you for being upset, but—"

"*Upset!*" screamed the earphones. "They're going to eat me."

"Eat you?"

"After I'm french fried in that oil. Timberlake, you rat, it's your fault. You did it—"

"No, no," Timberlake shouted. "Archie, believe me, it was pure chance the way he counted us out. You know—eenie, meenie, miny—"

"You know what I'm talking about. I wanted to take the guns along when we landed. But not you. No, you said, the index showed they knew all about human history and galactic development—"

"Well, they do. They just don't believe it."

"—and besides, the whole thing was your idea in the first place. If we'd minded our own business and gone on straight to file our claim on Drachmae VII, nothing would've happened. But you had to answer a call for help. Call for help! I'll bet the whole thing was a decoy. What kind of an SOS is it that goes '*Help. Help! Have pity on two doomed mothers. Save our children*'?"

"Archie," said Timberlake, reproachfully. "Don't you have any human sympathy for people in distress?"

"I like that!" screeched the earphones. "Look who's talking. Here

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I am about to be boiled in oil and there you are, free as a bird, planning on picking up those two infants, flying home in their ship, collecting some terrific reward and living to a rich old age—and talking about sympathy for people in distress. I like that—"

Gently and sorrowfully, Timberlake tuned his friend and partner out. Instead, he tuned in the SOS, which was still being broadcast. The needle of his direction finder jumped and steadied, pointing away down the valley. Evidently the old medicine man had been telling the truth. What had he said? Oh, yes, about half a day's march away.

Timberlake marched.

It was easy enough going as long as he continued in a straight line. The valley, cropped by timid herds of what looked like antelope, was as clear and open and greenly grassed as the front lawn of his home back on Earth. But when he came to the red mountain, a certain amount of uncertainty entered the picture. How does one turn right at a mountain? That is to say, you can turn right when you first come to the mountain, or you can turn right just after you pass the mountain . . . Timberlake slowed down in perplexity.

However, just as he came to the near flank of the mountain, he observed one of the green-skinned tribesmen leaning on a spear and gazing off in the opposite direction. Timberlake halted, ready to run for it; but when the other did not move, he thought of the fact that the shaman had already given him what amounted to a safe-conduct by turning him loose, and carefully approached.

"Er—hello," he said to the tribesman.

"Iggle protect me!" said the tribesman, coming abruptly to life, recognizing him and backing off a step. He turned a pale lemon-green. "I was daydreaming and didn't see you sneak up on me. You better not try anything, Devil. I've got my grandfather's left little finger-bone right here in my pouch."

"I'm not going to hurt you," said Timberlake, annoyed. "I just want to find the two young devils that live around here."

"Are they young?" said the tribesman, doubtfully. "One's little enough but the other's as big as a council hut. You're sure that's all you want, Devil? Just directions?"

"That's all," said Timberlake.

"Of course—well, er, you just turn right here and follow up that little stream there. You'll come to a sort of a glen. You can't miss it. And now, if you'll excuse me, I've got to spear some of these here xers for dinner. So long." And the tribesman hastily took off.

Watching him go, Timberlake had a sudden impulse to pound himself on the head. Now that the man was gone, he had immediately

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thought of a dozen reasons for holding on to the tribesman. Hold him as a hostage, trick him out of his spear—oh, well, it was too late now. Timberlake turned and began to ascend the gentle lower slope of the mountain alongside the streambed.

He revolved a number of plans in his mind as he climbed. The full moon . . . when would that be? He wished he'd looked at the sky the previous night, or the night before when they landed; but not expecting anything like this, it had never occurred to him to do so. He could remember that there had been a moon both nights. But what shape had it been? His cudgeled memory refused to tell him.

Well, even if it was only a few days away, things were far from hopeless. The SOS signal they had intercepted must mean that the ship—whatever it was—was not badly damaged. And a ship of any kind meant weapons of some kind. Give him the equivalent of one good flame rifle and he could go back, clean out the village and rescue Swenson. He thought of calling up his partner and telling him this, but Swenson's jumping to the conclusion that Timberlake was out to desert his partner had hurt Timberlake's feelings. Old Archie ought to know better than that. Let him sweat it out a bit if that was all the trust he had. Teach him to appreciate his buddy in the future.

Puffing a bit—for the slope was becoming steeper — Timberlake passed into a grove of trees and the sudden shadow reminded him of the fact that it had been noon when he had been freed and that the afternoon was now far advanced. He leaned against the rise of the ground and increased his pace. The streamside grew rockier and carpeted with something like pine needles from the trees overhead. Eventually, he came to a waterfall and a small cliff.

He climbed the cliff, with effort, and emerged at last into a little miniature valley with steep sides. In the center of it, the stream spread out into a tiny lake, and in the open meadow that surrounded it he saw, in that order, a small but very neat stone house, an enormous pile of young trees piled together to form a shaky sort of tall lean-to, and a spaceship of alien make.

The spaceship had hit the mountain. It was so much scrap.

Timberlake gulped and sat down on a handy boulder. A damaged ship he had expected, a wrecked ship he had foreseen as a possibility, but a ship in fragments had been beyond the scope of his imagination. If this was what had happened how had the children referred to in the message survived?

Getting shakily to his feet again, he hurried across the meadow to-

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ward the little stone house, since that was the nearest of the two structures. It was a remarkable job of building, rocks cemented together with some sort of grayish-purple clay, and provided with curtained, if unglassed, windows. It possessed also what seemed to be a hand-carved door, and a small, square chimney from which a polite curl of smoke ascended.

A little hesitantly, Timberlake knocked at the door.

"Come in!" the translator reported a high-pitched voice as saying from beyond it. Timberlake opened it and, stooping his head, entered.

He found himself in a square, large, single room, furnished with mathematical precision and spartan simplicity. A square box mattressed with dried grass clung to one of the walls. The other walls, where a window did not interrupt, were furnished with shelves, drawers, and filing cabinets, all handmade. The only exception was a somewhat bent and damaged sort of drawing table at which a small, meter-tall, gray-skinned creature with a large head and tarsier-like eyes sat with a bird quill, a pot of what looked like ink and a pile of large, white leaves, covered with inky marks.

"Though only a nine-month-old pid," squeaked this creature, "I can recognize you as a member of the human species. You will want to know my name. It is Agg. Perhaps you will want to tell me your name."

"Er—Jim Timberlake," said Timberlake. "How do you do?"

"I do everything with the superb efficiency of a pid," squeaked Agg. "Though only nine months old as yet—as you can see. What can I do for you, Jim?"

"Well," said Timberlake, feeling somewhat foolish. "My partner and I came in answer to an SOS—"

"Extremely p r o v i d e n t i a l," squeaked the pid. It stroked its long nose, which Jim now noticed was extremely sharp at the tip, almost like the point of a spear or a horn. "I'll pack and be right with you."

"Well, the fact is," said Timberlake. "We won't be able to just take off like that—" and he explained the bad luck that had befallen Swenson and himself.

"Ah," said the pid. "In that case I won't pack since I won't be going after all. Thank you. Goodby."

"Hey, wait!" cried Timberlake as the pid picked up its quill again. "We can still make it. What we have to do is get Swenson away from those savages and our ship, too."

"How?" asked the pid.

"Well, I thought you'd probably have saved some guns from your ship—"

"What guns? Everything in the ship was destroyed, except what was in the deceleration chamber—our eggs and the library, of which

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I have taken the technical texts into my own safekeeping." The pid pointed toward one of the shelves which was racked with bank on bank of microspools. "Our mothers sacrificed their own bodies as fuel to ensure that the ship would reach this planet. When I first broke out of the egg, after landing, prehatching conditioning had informed me what to do. I set up the secondary SOS beacon and began my education. It's nine months now and so far I've only covered through the general theory of galactic origins. You must excuse me. Good day."

"But my partner—"

"I can't do anything to help. Good day."

"Listen!" cried Timberlake. "We came all this way to rescue you. If it hadn't been for that, Swenson wouldn't be in trouble right now. Don't you have any conscience?"

"Certainly not. Consciences are based on emotion. They are ipso facto illogical," said the pid. "And we pids are supreme in the field of logic. Good day."

Too angry to argue further, Timberlake stamped out.

He emerged into the dwindling afternoon sunlight. Some thirty yards away was the enormous lean-to. So angry that he forgot all about being apprehensive as to what might require a shelter so large, Timberlake plowed across to it.

As he came close, he became aware of a deep sort of humming that came from its shadowy interior. The humming swelled and erupted into a minor shriek and an exclamation which the translator rendered as "My goodness!"

"Hello in there!" said Timberlake, and walked in.

He found himself facing an enormous dragon-like being with a small, bumpy head somewhat resembling a kangaroo's and a microspool scanner strapped over its eyes. It sat with its huge armor-plated tail curled around itself in a far corner of the hut, surrounded by microspools and general litter. As he watched, the dragon pushed the scanner up on its forehead and regarded him.

"Why—why—who're you?" The dragon tucked its relatively small forepaws into its enormous body and seemed to huddle away from Timberlake.

"Name's Timberlake," grunted Jim. "My partner and I came to rescue you. We—"

"Rescue!" cried the dragon, ecstatically, flinging its arms wide. "Oh, joy! Oh, triumph! How long in this deserted land have I suffered, but now the hour of my deliverance is at hand." He broke off. "What did you say your name was? Mine's Yloo."

"Jim Timberlake. I'm a human," said Timberlake, digging at one ear which seemed to have closed up entirely under the impact of the dragon's tremendous voice.

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"Oh, *gallant* human! Come at last—but ah, too late, too late . . ." And the dragon burst into sobs.

"Too late?"

"My mommy . . ." choked the dragon, and could not go on. It cried heartbreakingly; and Timberlake, who was not a completely insensitive man, gave in to the impulse to go over and pat it comfortingly on the head. It shoved its barrel-like snout into his arms and snuffled.

"There, there," said Timberlake, awkwardly.

"Forgive me—forgive me. I can't help it. I'm sensitive, that's all there is to it. Just naturally sensitive, like my mommy."

"Who was your mommy?" asked Timberlake, to get its mind off its troubles.

"Why—" said the dragon, raising its head in surprise. "She was an illobar, like me. Oh, she was beautiful! Such great white fangs, such shining claws, such a magnificent huge tail! And yet, a heart as delicate as a flower. If a petal fell, a tear of hers fell with it."

"You remember her, do you?" said Timberlake, making a mental note of this fact that the illobar must be older than the pid, who had been in his egg at the time of the crash.

"Dear me, no! I have fabricated the memory of her beloved image from these romantic novels that she placed safely in the liquid deceleration chamber with my—" the illobar hid its head and said in a small, embarrassed voice "—'egg'. A person who loved such things would just have to be the way I imagine her. Was it not her loving hand that set the educator also in the deceleration chamber to start my baby feet aright upon the path, when I should break out of my shell? Yes!" said the illobar with welling eyes. "Put it all together, it spells MOTHER!" It straightened up and blew its nose on one of the large white leaves that Timberlake had seen put to the use of writing paper at the pid's. "But enough of *my* painful past. You've come to rescue me. Let's go."

"Well, we can't just leave like that," said Timberlake. "You see, there's been a slight hitch—" He told the illobar about Swenson and the green-skinned tribesmen.

"What? Captive? And doomed?" trumpeted the illobar, rearing up with flashing eyes. "Shall such a thing be? No! To the rescue! Charge!"

He extended a forearm; and Timberlake, filled with joy at this martial response, charged out of the hut—only to find, as he emerged into the sunset, that the illobar had not followed him out.

He went back inside. The illobar avoided his gaze, breathed on its claws and polished them against the bony plate of its chest, humming embarrassedly.

"What happened?" demanded Timberlake.

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"Oh well," said the illobar, weakly. "I just thought—they'll have spears and things. I can't bear the thought of being hurt."

Timberlake groaned and sat in despair.

"Oh, please don't feel bad!" cried the illobar. "I can't stand it when anything looks sad."

Timberlake snorted.

"You mustn't feel that way. Please cheer up. Listen," said the illobar. "Let me read you the beautiful lines spoken by Smgna in Gother's *Pxrion,* when she hears her cause is hopeless." Hastily, it fitted a fresh microspool into its scanner and commenced to read in a high-pitched, soulful voice: "*. . . so shall star-bought destiny be ever indicative of philoprogenitiveness. Were Gnruth a snug, a whole snug, and nothing but a snug, I should have signed his contract. Since he is nothing but a brxl, I shall carry his memory into the cave of death. . . .* Here," said the illobar, interrupting itself to push the scanner up on its forehead and pour something from what appeared to be a small keg into something else like a large shell. "Would you care for a drop of my homemade wine?"

Listlessly, Timberlake took the shell. He sniffed at the contents. They had a faintly alcoholic odor, but looked rather heavy, colorless and oily. What the hell, he thought, and poured them down his throat.

Liquid fire strangled him.

Something dealt him a stunning blow on the back of the neck.

—And that was all he remembered.

Timberlake groaned and opened his eyes. Morning sunlight was creeping between the branches of the lean-to. His head had been turned into a gremlin's smithy and a camel would have felt at home in his mouth.

"What was in that?" he croaked. No one answered. The lean-to was empty. Timberlake staggered to his feet, tottered a dozen yards or so to the brim of the little lake and plunged in his head. The cold water was balm in Gilead.

Half an hour later, having sluiced himself well inside and out and bound a soaked handkerchief around his aching head, Timberlake, with a sudden attack of conscience, remembered Swenson.

Oh, no! thought Timberlake. Remorse for his imprisoned partner flooded through him. He had meant to call Swenson back as soon as he had time to calm himself down. Instead, he had let the unfortunate man dwell alone in his misery through the long night. The self-despising that accompanies a good hangover was gnawing at Timberlake's vitals. He pictured Swenson alone, helpless, facing a hideous death and feeling himself callously cut off from even a friendly word.

With guilty fingers, Timberlake

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activated the radio and pressed the mike tight against his throat.

"Archie!" he called. "Archie! Come in, Archie! Answer me. Are you all right? Archie?"

A curious, rhythmic sound floated from the headphones into his ears.

"Archie!" said Timberlake, shocked. "My god, Archie, don't cry! Don't do that!"

"Who's crying?" retorted the slightly fuzzy-sounding voice of Swenson. "I'm laughing. Laugh and the universe laughs with you. Cry and you cry alone. Whoops! Tonight I will be boiled in oil, boiled in oil, boiled in oil. Tonight I will be boiled in oil, all on a full moon eeeeevening!"

"Archie!" yelped Timberlake, forgetting his own misery in this astonishing response. "What's happened to you? What've they done to you?"

"Nothing!" returned Archie's voice, indignantly. "They've been wonderful to me. Wonderful! I've got this lovely pen all to myself, all the jubix I can chew—"

"The what?"

"The jubix. Jubix."

"What's that?"

"Damfino," said Swenson. "Good for the nerves, though. Jim, you wouldn't believe how relaxed I feel. Just relaxed, and relaxed—"

"Archie, you idiot!" cried Timberlake. "You've been drugged. Don't eat any more of that jubix stuff. It's a drug."

"Nonsense, That's just your suspicious nature. You always were a suspicious son of a gun. But I don't mind. I like you anyway. Good ol' Jimmy, good ol' medicine man, good ol' pot . . ." and the voice trailed off into a snore.

"Archie! Archie! Wake up—" Suddenly something Swenson had said struck home to Timberlake's hangover-fogged brain. "Did you say they were going to boil you *tonight*?"

"*Zzz*—huh? Certainly. Full moon tonight. Big party. Boil me, blow up ship—"

"Blow up the ship!" screeched Timberlake. "Archie, what're you talking about?"

"Well, I wanted to do something for them, too," said Swenson, in a defensive tone of voice. "It isn't as if we're going to be using it for anything ourselves, any more." He continued, anxiously, "You aren't mad at me, are you, Jimmy?"

With a cold and shaking hand, Timberlake snapped off the radio. The sweat stood out on his brow. The hammers pounded inside his skull. His brain raced.

This was no time for half measures. He considered the situation. If he wanted to get off this planet alive and save Swenson, something had to be done before the ceremony took place in that village tonight. What a situation! Here he was, weaponless, with nothing but a pair of idiotic alien children on his hands. . . .

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Out of the machiavellian depths which a hangover will uncover in the mind of the otherwise mildest man came a sudden notion.

Of course, thought Timberlake! After all, that's what the pid and the illobar were. Only children. He had been misled by the sharpness of the pid's mind and the illobar's size. But an adult of any species does not (*a*) boast about how good he is for his age or (*b*) cry for his mommy.

Ha! thought Timberlake.

There was no hope of rescuing Swenson without a gun; and the guns were in their spaceship. And the spaceship—ceremony or no—would undoubtedly be guarded. And he, himself alone, could not hope to take on the customary pair of spear-carrying guardians.

On the other hand—

Why couldn't the sentries be decoyed away from the ship? Say, by something like a fight? To be specific, why not something like a fight between an illobar and a pid? Once the ship was unguarded, he, Timberlake, could slip in through the door, pick up a gun and immediately command the situation. As for the two young aliens, the illobar had all the size, but he was willing to bet that the pid had all the guts. They shouldn't harm each other too much.

Timberlake staggered to his feet. The illobar was nowhere in sight; but the pid's chimney exhibited its customary curl of smoke. Timberlake headed for the small stone building, turning over plans in his mind.

At the door he knocked.

"Come in," squeaked the pid.

He entered.

"I've just evolved my own theory of an expanding universe," said the pid, proudly. "Take a seat, Jim, and listen while I tell you about it. You'll be amazed."

"Just a minute," said Timberlake. "I wanted to ask you something about your friend."

"What friend?"

"The illobar."

"Friendship is illogical," said the pid. It produced something that looked like a long whetstone and began to rasp the sharp tip of its nose with it. "The illobar doesn't concern me. It is a creature of no logic."

"Then I won't be speaking out of turn if I say I'm pretty disappointed in him," said Timberlake cunningly. "He didn't have the mind to see how there's a perfect way to get our ship back and get off the planet."

"Of course not—what?" said the pid. "What perfect way is there for us to get off the planet?"

"Come now," said Timberlake. "You're kidding me. I know you've already thought of it for yourself."

"Er—well, yes," said the pid, twiddling its nose, uncertainly. "I suppose I . . . yes, to be sure."

"Of course. A pid would be the

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first to see it. Well, shall we leave at once?"

"Of course," squeaked the pid, jumping down from his chair. "Let's be off—no, I should pack."

"I'm afraid there won't be room for your stuff on the ship. You can replace it, of course, when we get to civilization."

"Naturally," said the pid. It led the way out of the house.

They were crossing the meadow when the illobar reappeared from a belt of trees further up the mountainside. It came galloping up to them, shaking the earth, at something around forty or fifty miles an hour. In the morning sunlight, it towered over Timberlake awe-inspiringly.

"Where are you going?" it asked Timberlake.

"We're going to rescue my partner, get our ship back and get off the planet."

"Oh dear," said the illobar, clasping and unclasping its hands nervously. "Won't it be dangerous?"

"What of it?" said Timberlake.

"Well—I think I won't go. Goodby," said the illobar.

"Goodby," said Timberlake. "Come on, Agg," he added to the pid.

"Illobars," said the pid, as they moved off, "are useless creatures. I don't know why my mother bothered to go traveling around with one."

The illobar watched them go. They reached the waterfall and climbed down the rocky slope down the mountain. Just as they reached the valley, there was a thumping of feet behind them and the illobar trotted up.

"Hello," it said, brightly.

"Hello," replied Timberlake. "I thought you weren't coming."

"Oh, I'm not," said the illobar, quickly. "I just thought I'd walk part way with you—seeing you don't have any real company, only that pid."

"Illobars," said the pid, confidently to Timberlake, "always think people are interested in them."

"Pids," said the illobar, in Timberlake's other ear, "are so self-centered, it's disgusting."

"Oh, well," said Timberlake, soothingly. And the party of three continued along the park-like valley.

The illobar could probably have made the trip in an hour, or less than that, if pushed. Four hours would have made a fast trip for Timberlake. The pid, because of his relatively short legs, considered it pretty much a day's journey. And since they were restricted to the speed of their slowest member, they all moved along at a pid's pace. And this was not exactly soothing to Timberlake's anxious spirit as the day wore on, particularly since the pid insisted on discoursing on the beauty of mathematics as they walked, while the

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illobar, not to be outdone, quoted poetry in epic lengths. Finally, however, the village showed up over a little rise, about a mile or so distant; and, just beyond it, rosy in the light of the setting sun, was the silver upright shape of the spaceship.

"All right, boys," said Timberlake. "Now we circle and come up on the village from behind the ship."

"A straight line," objected the pid, "is the shortest distance between two points."

"Not at all," disagreed the illobar. "There's nothing like making a circle. A good, big circle," he added nervously.

Timberlake settled the discussion by moving off to his left. The other two followed him.

The shadows lengthened visibly as they moved across the valley, and by the time the three adventurers were opposite the village, the only thing visible in the sunlight was the gleaming top tip of the spaceship. Hastily, Timberlake began to swing back in; but before he was all the way back, the sun disappeared entirely and the sunset glow with it.

Timberlake cursed under his breath. There was such a thing as carrying caution too far. He continued by dead reckoning. After about twenty minutes or so of this, he felt his sleeve twitched by the illobar. He stopped and put out a hand to halt the pid.

"Oh, my goodness!" quavered the illobar. "There it is. See it?"

With difficulty, Timberlake made out Yloo's pointing forearm overhead. Squinting along in a line with it through the darkness, he managed to see, not the spaceship exactly, but a dark shape occulting a reddish fire-glow that was beginning to gleam upward from behind the palisade of the village.

"Shh," he cautioned.

He listened. He turned the translator up to full volume. A murmur from somewhere ahead whispered from his earphones.

"—so the next night he comes home and his wife is stewing the xer meat again. And he says, 'I thought I told you I didn't like my xer meat stewed,' and she says—"

"What's the reason for this delay?" demanded the pid. "I find it illogical and pointless."

"Shh," said Timberlake. But he had found out what he wanted to know. The fire inside the village was flickering above the palisade now; and he could make out not only the black bulk of the ship, but two lesser shadows, leaning on spears beside the open hatchway. Now for his plan.

"I'm going to circle around and take them from behind," he told the pid and illobar, and moved off without giving them time to answer. After a moment, when he judged he was far enough off for the darkness to swallow him up, he

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turned about and hissed, "stay quiet. And no matter what stupid remarks he makes, don't get mad and argue with him."

Rapidly, Timberlake backed off a little further, but not out of earshot, and lay down on the soft turf to listen and await developments. For a moment there was no answer from either of the young aliens. And then the illobar quavered in a low voice:

"I won't!"

There was a muted snort from the pid and a whisper.

"What do you mean, *you* won't? The human was talking to me."

"Was not!" retorted the illobar in a restrained voice. "He was talking to me. How could he be talking to you? You don't have any emotions worth speaking about."

"But you're the only one that's stupid."

"Oh!" gasped the illobar. "I am not!"

"You are too. All illobars are stupid."

"You take that back!" retorted the illobar, beginning to rumble a bit ominously in the lower registers. "You're talking about the mommy I loved, you pipsqueak adding-machine addict."

"That's a lie!" squeaked the pid, furiously. "No pid ever used an adding machine in his life, you—"

Their voices were rising satisfactorily. Timberlake left them and began to crawl toward the spaceship. He was halfway there when the two guards strolled past him, bound for the scene of the disturbance. Timberlake got up, dusted himself off, and proceeded to the ship. The guns were still lying as they had been left, in the rack. He took a flame rifle and headed for the village.

Behind him, a roaring, screaming, ground-shaking catfight seemed to have broken out. A twinge of conscience troubled Timberlake's mind. He had not expected to be quite so successful. He put the matter forcibly from his mind.

He came up on the village from the back. At the secondary entrance there was only one lackadaisical guard, and he, like the rest of the village, was busy staring off in the direction of the pid-and-illobar contest, which could be plainly heard on the night air. Timberlake conked him with his rifle butt, slipped inside and went hunting Swenson.

His earlier imprisonment had familiarized him with the general pattern of the village. He slipped between huts and came upon the pen without too much difficulty. Swenson was sitting on the ground outside it, completely unchained and unguarded, singing "Ja, Vi Elsker Dette Landet" with tears of emotion in his eyes. He was obviously in sad shape.

"Archie!" hissed Timberlake, shaking him by the shoulder. "Come on. Let's get out of here."

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"Get out of here?" echoed Swenson, looking up at him. "Why, Jimmy, what do you take me for? Escape and disappoint all these nice people who've been heating a pot for me since noon? Nonsense. Here—" He extended something that looked like a stick of licorice. "Have some of this. You'll agree with me."

Timberlake recoiled from the stuff as if the snaky strip was alive.

"Archie!" he said, frantically. "Snap out of it. We've got to get to the ship and get out of here!"

Archie giggled helplessly. Timberlake frantically searched his mind for something in the line of guile to influence his doped partner.

Inspiration struck him.

"Wait, Archie," he said. "I've got an idea. We won't really leave. We'll just sneak off outside the village and pretend to hide. Then, when they come searching for us, we'll jump out at them and say—"

"Let me carry the gun," said Swenson, cautiously.

"As soon as we get outside the gate."

"No. Now!"

"No, Archie, you—"

"Now, or I won't go!"

Sadly, Timberlake handed over the weapon. Swenson took it and threw it up on top of one of the huts.

"Surprise! Surprise!" he yelled. "Come and get him. Surprise!"

There was a rush from the shadows of the surrounding huts and Timberlake went down beneath a crowd of heavy bodies. They pulled him pinioned to his feet and he found himself facing the medicine man.

"How nice of you to join us," said that individual.

Timberlake fainted.

When he revived, both he and Swenson were lined up in front of the fire, before which a large pot was bubbling merrily with oil. Its peculiar fragrance reached Timberlake's nostrils and turned him white.

"You can't do this!" he cried to the shaman.

"Why not?" asked the shaman, who was standing beside him.

"Because—because if you touch us, hundreds of devils will come in hundreds of ships. They'll—they'll burn your village to the ground—uh—put you through psycho-reconditioning, reestablish your social structure—"

"Come now," said the shaman, "that's the sort of thing devils always say just before they're boiled. These idle threats don't frighten us."

"They aren't idle threats!" shrieked Timberlake. "Turn us loose at once or I'll put a curse on you. Impshi, bimpshi—"

"My dear Devil," protested the shaman, "please stop making a scene. It's painful for all of us. Here, have a chew of this—"

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Timberlake frantically knocked the licorice-like strip of substance out of the medicine man's hand.

"Help, spirits!" Suddenly, Timberlake noticed that the sound of fighting in the distance had ceased. Was it possible . . . ? "Help, Yloo!" he cried at the top of his voice. "Help, Agg! Help! Help! *Heelllp!*

"Devil, stop that!" shouted the shaman.

A section of the palisade behind him abruptly bulged inward and split apart.

"Did someone call for help?" inquired the illobar, appearing in the opening.

"Avaunt, Devil!" cried the shaman, confidently, and threw a spear. It bounced harmlessly off the illobar's armor-plated chest.

"Poof!" said the illobar, confidently. "Those little things don't scare *me.*" It advanced into the firelight; and Timberlake was astonished to see that the pid was still clinging to the dragon-like neck, its long, sharp needle-nose stuck into the back of the illobar's head.

"Are you all right, sir?" squeaked the pid, and blushed. "Excuse my earlier lack of manners."

"As for you," said the illobar, severely to the shaman. "Are you going to let these nice humans go? Or do I have to sit down on your huts, one by one—like this!" It sat down on one of the huts. The hut was effectively demolished.

"No—no—" said the shaman, hastily. "Whatever you say, Devil. Just get out of here." He had turned so pale a green that he looked nearly white.

"I want to be boiled in oil!" spoke up Swenson, obstinately.

"Pay no attention," said Timberlake, hastily to the illobar. "He's not in his right mind. Just pick him up if you will—like that, that's just fine. Thank you."

Swenson, hanging limply in the crook of the illobar's right forearm, burst into tears of disappointment.

"Maybe you better carry me, too," said Timberlake, "—and fast."

He felt himself scooped up; there was a rapid jolting passage with the wind whistling about his ears; and he found himself set down in the lock of the spaceship.

Timberlake left the illobar struggling to squeeze through the lock and dashed to the control room. Eighteen seconds later the LOCK CLOSED; light blinked red on the panel; and the ship took off. The haven of deep space took it to its peaceful, empty arms.

There was a sound behind Timberlake in the control room. He set the automatic pilot and turned about. The illobar, with the pid still spiked to it, had just squeezed into the room.

"I put your friend in the cabin to sleep it off," said the illobar. "Was that right?"

"Perfect," said Timberlake. He got up and studied them.

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"Let's see," he said. "If you'll just lie down, I'll get a crowbar—"

"A crowbar?" echoed the illobar.

"To—er, pry you loose," said Timberlake, slightly embarrassed. "You seem to be sort of stuck—"

"Oh, my!" squeaked the pid. "That's all right. You see, we belong together like this."

"Huh?" said Timberlake.

"Oh yes," put in the illobar. "It was just a matter of time before we engaged in ritual combat and came to this. Little pids and illobars like us have a natural hate for each other that is a precursor of their mature jointure and love."

"But Yloo—" stammered Timberlake.

"No, no, you don't understand," said the illobar. "I'm not really Yloo, any more than he's Agg. Really, we were just two parts of the complete being: Aggyloo, a pidillobar."

"A symbiotic relationship, you see," squeaked the pid. "A welding of the mental and the emotional into a well-rounded, single ego."

"Oh," said Timberlake.

"Yes," said Aggyloo, pidillobar. It settled its enormous haunches on the floor, stroked the nasal connection between itself and continued in its squeaky upper voice. "If it hadn't been for the devotion of my mommies, we would never have survived to come to this. But my mommies knew what to do. They figured someone like you would come along. You see, my mommies . . ."

In Memoriam: FLETCHER PRATT

And saw the Norns, and spoke their island speech,
Who questioned him with fury in their single eye,
Where he was going with his red beard high,
And marmoset glance, with aeons in his reach,
What smoky warriors to riddle and to teach
In Nifelheim, the mead at last drained dry
And asp-ringed roots of Yggdrasil for sky
Until the roaring trumpet and the final breach.

"Out of time; it is not great enough.
"Out of space; I walked it, wall to wall.
"Out of the word, container for the thing contained,
"Out of every thick and dubious stuff
"Into the heart." And that was all.
And passed the furious threesome, who are chained.

June 10, 1956 —JAMES BLISH

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Recommended Reading

by ANTHONY BOUCHER

JUST AS HARDCOVER SCIENCE FICTION seemed about to vanish from the market place, a new firm has announced a policy of a hardcover s.f. novel every month.

This is welcome news to writers; and if Avalon Books continue to find novels as interesting as their first two, it will prove equally welcome to readers, and even to reviewers.

Hunt Collins' TOMORROW'S WORLD (Avalon, $2.50) is a fascinating, sometimes brilliant example of s.f. as satiric social extrapolation. Mr. Collins (pseudonym of a prolific author who has written, under various names, everything from a serious bestseller to first-rate paperback crime thrillers) posits a world of 2174 A.D. in which our culture, as shaped by its entertainment media, has been cleft into two groups of fanatic extremists, both typifying trends which exist in 1956: the Rees (for *realistic*) who "denied what was by refusing to permit representation of it," and the Vikes (for *vicarious*) who "denied what was by allowing the representation to replace the reality." The Vikes are in the majority, shunning sex for the pleasures of pornography, shunning life for the satisfactions of narcotics; and in studying their way of existence, Collins has achieved the most detailed science-fictional creation of a decadent society outside of the work of Fritz Leiber. The story of a political coup against V[illegible] domination is a strong one and well resolved (if with an unpardonably banal last line), and individual characterizations have unusual vitality. The science fiction purist may object that Collins has extrapolated only the cultural aspects of his society, and left its technology and economics vague and none too credible; but it's a fault easy to condone in a book otherwise so vivid and pointed.

Eric Frank Russell's THREE TO CONQUER (Avalon, $2.50) is satisfactory on a lower level. This is the novel serialized in *Astounding* last year as CALL HIM DEAD—a mélange of s.f. and detection which seems deliberately cruder in its writing than such memorable Russell stories as those in the collection DEEP SPACE. It combines in one package the telepath-detective of WILD TALENT OR THE DEMOLISHED MAN and the parasite-invader of THE

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PUPPET MASTERS OF THE BRAIN-STEALERS; and if both themes have been developed before with more cogent logic and consistency, there's so much melodramatic action-excitement that you're in no mood to look for flaws.

There's little to detain you in two recent paperbacks. Margaret St. Clair's THE GREEN QUEEN (Ace, 35¢) is a very short novel, published last year in *Other Worlds* as MISTRESS OF VIRIDIS, about a radioactive planet and a deliberately created myth which comes true—unclear and hard to follow, with many loose ends and little of the St. Clair-Seabright evocativeness. Joseph E. Kelleam's OVERLORDS FROM SPACE (Ace, 35¢) sets new standards of inept implausibility in the old theme of the revolt of enslaved earthmen against their alien masters, but does contain occasional glints of vivid imagination and visualization. Both are packaged with antiquarian exhumations—the St. Clair with Thomas Calvert Clary's 1938 THREE THOUSAND YEARS, the Kelleam with Ray Cummings' 1929 THE MAN WHO MASTERED TIME.

In short stories, William Tenn's THE HUMAN ANGLE (Ballantine, $2; paper, 35¢) probably seems a mite disappointing only because Tenn can be wonderful. This time he's merely good. The stories, chiefly from *Galaxy* 1954-1955, are more concerned with notions and switches than with character and narrative; but some of the notions (such as the dilemma of a pornography-peddler stranded among aliens with a different method of reproduction) are splendid; the treatment abounds in satiric wit; and 8 never-before-reprinted stories make a welcome bargain.

Donald A. Wollheim's THE END OF THE WORLD (Ace, 25¢) is a passable but unnecessary anthology. The title-theme is a good idea, but developed without the pattern-shaping skill of a Conklin or a Merril. Of the 6 stories in this short book, 3 (including excellent novelets by Heinlein and Clarke) have been reprinted before, not once but twice. The new material, amounting to less than 15,000 words, includes a good 1954 Coppel, an interesting if dated 1936 Hamilton, and an unspeakable 1932 item by Amelia Reynolds Long.

Rosemary Timperley's CHILD IN THE DARK (Crowell, $3.50) contains 3 tales—short stories in content, short novels in length—about the destruction of sensitive adolescent girls by dominant and evil adults. Particularly in the title story, Miss Timperley reveals delicate perception of the problems of youth and an ability to depict the classroom and the teacher-student relationship that almost suggests a British Zenna Henderson; but her plots are the routine clichés of the conventional British ghost story, resolved by flagrant mechanical contrivance.

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One of the most popular stories we've published in some time was Poul Anderson's Operation Afreet *(F&SF, September, 1956) — a fact which particularly pleases me because it was a story which could appear only in F&SF, treating, as it did, a magic world of fantasy with all the stern logical rigor of science fiction. Here is a new story of that same world, the Thaumaturgic Age when man has mastered the White and Black Arts by strict technological discipline. As befits this season, it's a college story, opening with a football game — and going on to as zany a peril as was ever confronted by a manly werewolf and a red-headed witch.*

Operation Salamander

by POUL ANDERSON

THE SKY WAS FULL OF BROOMsticks and the police were going nuts trying to handle the traffic. The Homecoming game always attracts an overflow crowd, also an overflow of high spirits. These I did not share. I edged my battered pre-war Chevvy past a huge 200-dragonpower Lincoln with sky-blue handle, polyethylene straw, and blatting radio. It sneered at me, but I got to the vacant rack first. Dismounting, I pocketed the runekey and mooched glumly through the mob.

The Weather Bureau kachinas are obliging about game nights. There was a cool crisp tang to the air, and dry leaves scrittled across the sidewalks. A harvest moon was rising like a big yellow pumpkin over the darkened buildings of Trismegistus University. I thought of Midwestern fields and woods, damp earthy smells and streaming mists, out beyond the city, and the wolf part of me wanted to be off and away after jackrabbits. But with proper training a were can control his reflexes, and polarized light doesn't have to cause more than a primitive tingle along his nerves.

For me, the impulse was soon lost in bleaker thoughts. Ginny, my darling! She should have been walking beside me, face lifted to the wind and long hair crackling in the thin frost; but the only consolation I had was an illegal hip-flask. Why the hell was I attending the game anyhow?

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Passing Teth Caph Sameth frat house, I found myself on the campus proper. Trismegistus was founded after the advent of modern science, and its layout reflects that fact. The largest edifice houses the Language Department, because exotic tongues are necessary for the more powerful spells (which is why so many African and Asian students come here to learn American slang); but there are two English halls, one for the arts college and one for Engineering Poetics. Nearby is the Therianthropology Building, which always has interesting displays of foreign technique: this month it was Eskimo, in honor of the visiting agekok Dr. Ayingalak. A ways off is Zoology, carefully isolated inside its pentagonal fence, for some of those long-legged beasties are not pleasant neighbors. The medical school has a shiny new research center, courtesy of the Rockefeller Foundation, from which have already come such stunning advances as the polaroid filter-lenses that make it possible for those afflicted with the Evil Eye to lead normal lives.

Only the law school is unaffected. Their work has always been of the other world.

Crossing the Mall, I went by the grimy little Physical Sciences Building just in time for Dr. Griswold to hail me. He came puttering down the steps, a small wizened fellow with goatee and merry blue eyes. Somewhere behind their twinkle lay a look of hurt bafflement, as of a child who could never quite understand why no one else was really interested in his toys.

"Ah, Mr. Matuchek," he said. "Are you attending the game?"

I nodded, not especially wanting company, but he tagged along and I had to be sociable. Not that I was apple-polishing—I was in his chemistry and physics classes, but they were snaps. I simply didn't have the heart to rebuff a nice, lonely old geezer.

"Me too," he went on. "I understand the cheerleaders have planned something spectacular between halves."

"Yeh?"

He cocked his head and gave me a birdlike glance. "If there is any difficulty, Mr. Matuchek . . . if I can help you . . . it's what I'm here for, you know."

"It's OK," I lied. "Thanks anyway, sir."

"It can't be easy for a mature man, a combat veteran and a famous actor, to start in with a lot of giggling freshmen," he said. "I remember how you helped me in that . . . ah . . . unfortunate incident last month. Believe me, Mr. Matuchek, I am grateful."

"Oh, hell, it's nothing. I came here to get an education." *And to be with Virginia Graylock—but that's impossible now.*

I saw no reason to load the details on him. It was simple enough. After we beat the kaftans off the

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Caliphate, I returned to Metro-Goldwyn-Merlin and resumed werewolfing for them. But the same exploit which introduced me to Ginny had left me bobtailed, and a brushpiece is a nuisance. I had medals, sure, but war heroes were a dime a coven—not that I claim an undue share of courage, events had merely flogged me into doing what I did. I couldn't get real conviction into my role in *Abbott and Costello Meet Paracelsus;* I don't look down on pure entertainment, but I discovered a new-born wish to do something more significant.

Ginny could get me into the Arcane Agency of which she was head witch, and I could work on that control of paranatural forces on which the whole world now depends. To be precise, I shared the common dream of taming Fire and Air enough to hitch them to a ship and reach the planets. But first I needed professional training. So Stephen Matuchek and MGM parted company with noises of mutual esteem, and I went to college on my savings and my G.I.

Ginny herself wanted a Ph.D.—she already had an M.A. from Congo—and Trismegistus offered her an instructorship while she took an extended leave of absence from the agency. Same school . . . we'd be together all our free hours, and I could probably talk her into an early marriage. Wonderful setup.

Like hell.

Griswold sighed, perhaps understanding my withdrawal. "There are times when I feel altogether useless," he said.

"Not at all, sir," I answered with careful heartiness. "How on Middle Earth would—oh, say alchemy—be practical without a grounding in chemistry and nuclear physics? You'd produce poisonous compounds, or blow up half a county."

"Of course, of course. You understand. You know something of the world—more than I, in all truth. But the students . . . well, I suppose it's only natural. They want to speak a few words, make a few passes, and get what they desire, just like that, without bothering to learn the Sanskrit grammar or the periodic table. They haven't realized that you never get something for nothing."

"They will. They'll grow up."

"Even the administration . . . this university just doesn't appreciate the need for physical science. Now at California, they're getting a billion-volt Philosopher's Stone, but here—" Griswold shrugged. "Excuse me. I despise self-pity."

We came to the stadium, and I handed over my ticket but declined the night-seeing spectacles. They'd given me witch-sight in basic training. My seat was on the 30-yard line, between a fresh-faced coed and an Old Grad already hollering himself raw. An animated tray went by, and I bought a hot dog

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and rented a crystal ball. But that wasn't to follow the details of play. I muttered over the globe and peered into it and saw Ginny.

She was seated on the 50, opposite side, the black cat Svartalf on her lap, her hair a shout of red against the human drabness around. That witchcraft peculiarly hers was something more old and strong than the Art in which she was so adept. Even across the field and through the cheap glass gazer, she made my heart stumble.

The problem was simply this: Trismegistus' President Malzius was a pompous mediocrity whose chief accomplishment had been to make the trustees his yes-men. What he said, went. And it was his arrogant idea to insist that all personnel take a geas to obey every University regulation while their contracts were in force. He had still corralled a pretty good faculty, for the salaries were good and the rules the ordinary ones. Ginny had signed her contract a month before I enrolled and not felt the kicker till too late.

Students and faculty members, right down to the instructor level, were not permitted to date each other.

Naturally I had stormed my way into Malzius' office and demanded an exception. No use. He wasn't going to revise the book for me —"bad precedent, Mr. Matuchek, bad precedent"—and I agreed sulkily that it was, indeed, a bad president. The rule would have had to be stricken completely, as the geas didn't allow special dispensations. Nor did it allow for the case of a student from another school, so it was pointless for me to transfer. The only solution, till Ginny's contract expired in June, would have been for me to drop out entirely, and with that cold-iron determination of hers she wouldn't hear of that. Lose a whole year? What was I, a wolf or a mouse? We had quite a quarrel about it, right out in public. And when you can only meet at official functions, it isn't just easy to kiss and make up.

Oh, sure, we were still engaged and still saw each other at smokers, teas . . . really living it up. Meanwhile, as she pointed out with that icy logic I knew was defensive but never could break past, we were human. From time to time she would be going out with some bachelor colleague, wishing he were me, and I'd squire an occasional girl around. . . .

Tonight she was with Dr. Alan Abercrombie, Assistant Professor of Comparative Nigromancy, sleek, blond, handsome, the lion of the tiffins. He'd been paying her a lot of attention while I smoldered alone.

Quite alone. I think Svartalf the cat considers my morals no better than his. I had every intention of fidelity, but when you've parked your broomstick in a moonlit lane

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and a cute bit of fluff is snuggled up against you . . . those round yellow eyes glowing from a nearby tree are remarkably style-cramping. I soon gave up and spent my evenings studying or drinking beer.

Heigh-ho. I drew my coat tighter about me and shivered in the wind. There was a smell of wrongness to the air . . . probably only my bad mood, I thought, but I'd sniffed trouble up in the future before now.

The Old Grad blasted my ears off as the teams trotted out into the moonlight, Trismegistus' Gryphons and the Albertus Magnus Wyverns. The very old grads say they can't get used to so many four-eyed runts wearing letters—apparently a football team was composed of dinosaurs back before the so-called Thaumaturgic Age. But of course the Art is essentially intellectual and has given its own tone to sports.

This game had its interesting points. The Wyverns levitated off and their skinny little quarterback turned out to be a werepelican. Dushanovitch, in condor shape, nailed him on our 20. Andrevski is the best line werebuck in the Big Ten, and held them for two downs. On the third, Pilsudski got the ball and became a kangaroo. His footwork was beautiful as he dodged a tackle (the guy had a Tarnkappe, but you could see the footprints advance) and passed to Mstislav. The Wyverns swooped low, expecting Mstislav to turn the ball into a raven for a field goal, but with lightning a-crackle as he fended off their counterspells, he made it into a pig . . . greased. (These were minor transformations, of course, a quick gesture at an object already sensitized, not the great and terrible Words I was to hear before dawn.)

A bit later, unnecessary roughness cost us 15 yards: Domingo accidentally stepped on a scorecard which had blown to the field and drove his cleats right through several of the Wyverns' names. But no great harm was done, and they got the same penalty when Thorsson was carried away by the excitement and tossed a thunderbolt. At the end of the first half, the score was Trismegistus 13, Albertus Magnus 6, and the crowd was nearly ripping up the benches.

I pulled my hat back off my ears, gave the Old Grad a dirty look, and stared into the crystal. Ginny was more of a fan than I; she was still jumping and hollering, hardly seeming to notice that Abercrombie had his arms around her. Or perhaps she didn't mind . . . ? I took a long resentful drag at my flask.

The cheering squad paraded out onto the field. Their instruments wove through an elaborate aerial maneuver, drumming and tootling, as they made the traditional march up to the Campus Queen. I'm told it's also traditional that she ride

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forth on a unicorn to meet them, but for some reason that was omitted this year.

The hair rose stiff on my neck and I felt the blind instinctive tug of Skinturning. Just in time I pulled myself back toward human and sat in a cold shudder. The air was rotten with danger. Couldn't *anyone* else smell it?

I focused my crystal on the cheering squad, looking for the source, only dimly aware of the yell—

Aleph, beth, gimel, daleth, he, vau,
Nomine Domini, bow, wow, wow!
Melt 'em in the fire and stick 'em with pins,
Trismegistus always wins. . . .
MACILWRAITH!

"Hey . . . what's wrong, mister?" The coed shrank from me, and I realized I was snarling.

"Oh. Nothing . . . I hope." With an effort I composed my face and kept it human.

The fattish blond kid down among the rooters didn't look harmful, but there was a sense of lightning-shot blackness about his future. I'd dealt with him before, and—

I didn't snitch on him at the time, but it was he who had almost broken up Griswold's chemistry class. Pre-med freshman, rich boy, not a bad guy at heart but with an unfortunate combination of natural aptitude for the Art and total irresponsibility. Medical students are notorious for merry little pranks such as waltzing an animated skeleton through the girls' dorm, and he wanted to start early.

Griswold had been demonstrating the action of a catalyst, and MacIlwraith had muttered a pun-spell to make a cat boil out of the test tube. Only he slipped up quantitatively and got a saber-toothed tiger. Because of the pun, it listed to starboard, but it was still a vicious, panic-raising thing. I ducked into a closet, used my pocket moonflash, and transformed; as a werewolf I chased Pussy out the window and up a tree till somebody could call the Exorcism Department.

Having seen MacIlwraith do it, I looked him up and warned him that if he disrupted the class again I'd chew him out in the most literal sense. Fun is fun, but not at the expense of students who really want to learn and a pleasant elderly anachronism who's trying to teach them.

—"TEAM!"

The cheerleader waved his hands and a spurt of many-colored fire jumped out of nothingness. Taller than a man it lifted, a leaping glory of red, blue, yellow, haloed with a wheel of sparks. Slitting my eyes, I could just discern the lizard-like form, white-hot and supple, within the aura.

The coed squealed. "Thrice blessed Hermes," choked the Old Grad. "What is it? A demon?"

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"No, a fire elemental," I muttered. "Salamander. Hell of a dangerous thing to fool around with."

My gaze ran about the field as the burning shape began to do its tricks, bouncing, tumbling, spelling out words in long flamebands. Yes, they had a fireman down there in full canonicals, making the passes that kept the thing harmless. It ought to be all right. . . . I lit a cigaret, shakily. It is not well to call up Loki's pets, and the stink of menace to come was acrid in my nostrils.

A good show, but—The crystal revealed Abercrombie clapping, but Ginny with a worried frown between the long green eyes. She didn't like it any better than I. Switch the ball back to MacIlwraith, fun-loving MacIlwraith.

I was probably the only one in the stadium who saw it. The boy gestured at his baton. It sprouted wings. The fat fireman, swaying back and forth with his gestures, was a natural target for a good healthy goose.

"Yeowp!"

He rocketed heavenward. The salamander wavered. All at once it sprang up, thinning out till it towered over the walls. There was a spinning, dazzling blur, and the thing was gone.

My cigaret burst luridly into flame and I tossed it from me. Hardly thinking, I jettisoned my hipflask. It exploded from a touch of incandescence and the alcohol burned blue. The crowd howled, hurling away their smokes, slapping at pockets where matches had kindled, getting rid of bottles. The Campus Queen shrieked as her thin dress caught fire. She got it off in time to prevent serious injury and went wailing across the field. Under different circumstances, I would have been very interested.

The salamander stopped its lunatic shuttling and materialized between goal posts that began to smoke—an intolerable blazing that scorched the grass and roared. The fireman dashed toward it, shouting the spell of extinguishment. From the salamander's mouth licked a tongue of fire. I heard a distinct Bronx cheer, then it was gone again.

The announcer, who should have been calming the spectators, screeched as it flickered before his booth. That touched off the panic! In one heartbeat, fifty thousand people were clawing and trampling, choking each other in the gates, blind with horror and trying only to fight their way out.

I vaulted across benches and an occasional head, down to the field. There was death on those jammed tiers. "Ginny! Ginny, come here where it's safe!"

She couldn't have heard me above the din, but came of herself, dragging a terrorized Abercrombie by one wrist. We faced each other in a ring of ruin.

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The Gryphons came boiling out of their locker room. Boiling is the right word: the salamander had materialized down there and playfully wrapped itself around the shower pipes.

Sirens hooted under the moon and police broomsticks shot above us, trying to curb the stampede. The elemental flashed for a moment across one of the besoms. Its rider dove it low enough to jump off, and the burning stick crashed on the grass.

"God!" exclaimed Abercrombie. "It's loose!"

"Tell me more," I snorted. "Ginny, you're a witch. Can you do anything about this?"

"I can extinguish the brute if it'll hold still long enough for me to recite the spell," she said. Disordered ruddy hair had tumbled past her pale, high-boned face to the fur-clad shoulders. "That's our only chance—the binding charm is broken, and it knows that!"

I whirled, remembering friend MacIlwraith, and collared him. "Were you possessed?" I shouted.

"I didn't do anything—" he gasped. His teeth rattled as I shook him.

"Don't hand me that guff. I saw it!"

He collapsed on the ground. "It was just for fun," he whimpered. "I didn't know—"

Well, I thought grimly, that was doubtless true. It's the trouble with the Art—with any blind powerful force man uses, fire or dynamite or atomic energy or thaumaturgy. Any meathead can learn enough to begin something; these days, they start them in the third grade with spelling bees. But it's not always so easy to halt the something.

Student pranks were a standing problem at Trismegistus, as at all colleges. They were usually harmless enough—sneaking into the dorms with Tarnkappen, or 'chanting female lingerie out through the windows. Sometimes they could be rather amusing, like the time the statue of a revered and dignified former president was animated and went downtown singing bawdy songs. Often they fell quite flat, as when the boys turned Dean Hornsby into stone and it wasn't noticed for three days.

This one had gotten out of hand. The salamander was quite capable of igniting the whole city.

I turned to the fireman, who was jittering about trying to flag down a police broom. In the dim shifty light, none of the riders saw him. "What d'you figure to do?" I asked.

"I gotta report back for duty," he said harshly. "And then we'll need a water elemental, I guess."

"I have experience with the Hydros," offered Ginny. "I'll come along."

"Me too," I said at once.

Abercrombie glowered. "What can *you* do?"

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"I'm were," I snapped. "In wolf shape I can't easily be harmed by fire. That might turn out useful."

"All right, Steve!" Ginny smiled at me, the old smile which had so often gone between us. Impulsively, I grabbed her to me and kissed her.

She didn't waste energy on a slap. I collected an uppercut that tumbled me on my tocus. "Not allowed," she clipped. That double-damned geas! I could see misery caged within her eyes, but her mind was compelled to obey Malzius' rules.

"It's . . . ah . . . no place for a woman—a lady as charming as you," murmured Abercrombie. "Let me take you home, my dear."

"I've got work to do," she said impatiently. "What the devil is wrong with those cops? We've got to get a lift out of here."

"Then I shall come too," said Abercrombie. "I am not unacquainted with blessings and curses, though—ha!—I fear that ever-filled purses are a trifle beyond my scope. In any event, the Treasury Department frowns on them."

Even in that moment, with riot thundering and hell let loose on earth, I was pleased to note that Ginny paid no attention to his famous wit. She scowled abstractedly and looked around. The Campus Queen was huddled near the benches, wearing somebody's overcoat. Ginny grinned and waved her wand. The Campus Queen shucked the coat and ran toward us. Thirty seconds later, three police broomsticks had landed. The fireman commandeered them and we were all whirled over the stadium and into the street.

During that short hop, I saw three houses ablaze. The salamander was getting around!

We gathered at the district police station, a haggard and sooty crew with desperate eyes. The fire and police chiefs were there, and a junior officer going crazy at the switchboard. Ginny, who had picked up her own broom and come via her apartment, arrived with Svartalf on one shoulder and the *Handbook of Alchemy and Metaphysics* under her arm. Abercrombie was browbeating the terrified MacIlwraith till I told him to lay off.

"My duty—" he began. "I'm a proctor, you know."

I suppose it's necessary to have witchsmellers on campus, to make sure the boys don't 'chant up liquor in the frat houses or smuggle in succubi. And every year somebody tries to get by an exam with a familiar under his coat whispering the answers from a crib-sheet. Nevertheless, I don't like professional nosy parkers.

"You can deal with him later," I said, and gave the boy a push out the door. "The salamander can fight back."

President Malzius huffed into

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the room. "What is the meaning of this?" he demanded. His pince-nez bobbed above full jowls. "I'll have you know, sir, I was preparing a most important address. The Lions Totem is holding a luncheon tomorrow, and—"

"Might not be any lunch," grunted the cop who had fetched him. "There's a salamander loose around here."

"Sala—No! It's against the rules! It is positively forbidden to—"

The man at the switchboard looked up. "It's just kindled the Methodist church at 14th and Elm," he said. "And my God, all our equipment is already working—"

"Impossible!" cried Malzius. "A demon can't go near a church."

"How stupid does a man have to be to get your job?" Ginny fairly spat it. "This *isn't* a demon. It's an elemental." Her temper was again sheathed in ice, and she continued slowly: "We haven't much hope of using a Hydro to put out the salamander, but we can raise one to help fight the fires. It'll always be three jumps behind, but at least the whole city won't be ruined."

"Unless the salamander gets too strong," cut in Abercrombie. His face was colorless and he spoke through stiff lips. "Then it can evaporate the Hydro."

"Call up two water beings," stammered Malzius. "Call up a hundred. I'll waive the requirement of formal application for permission to—"

"There's a limit, sir," Abercrombie told him. "The restraining force required is an exponential function of the total embodied mass. There probably aren't enough adepts in this town to control more than three at a time. If we raised four . . . we'd flood the city, and the salamander need only skip elsewhere."

"Alan—" Ginny laid her handbook on the desk and riffled its pages. Abercrombie leaned over her shoulder, remembering to rest one hand carelessly on her hip. I choked back my prize cuss-words. "Alan, just for a starter, can you summon one Hydro and put it to work?"

"Of course, gorgeous one," he smiled. "It is a—ha!—elemental problem."

She gave him a worried glance. "They can be as tricky as Fire or Air," she warned. "It's not enough just to know the theory."

"I have some small experience," he preened. "During the war—After this is over, come up to my place for a drink and I'll tell you about it." His lips brushed her cheek.

"Mr. Matuchek!" wailed Malzius. "Will you please stop growing fangs?"

I shook myself and suppressed the rage which had been almost as potent as moonlight.

"Look here," said the police

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chief. "I gotta know what's going on. You longhairs started this trouble and I don't want you making it worse."

Seeing that Ginny and Pretty Boy were, after all, legitimately busy, I sighed and whistled up a cigaret. "Let me explain," I offered. "I learned a few things about the subject, during the war. An elemental is not the same as a demon. Any kind of demon is a separate being, as individual as you and I. An elemental is part of the basic force involved: in this case, fire, or more accurately energy. It's raised out of the basic energy matrix, given temporary individuality, and restored to the matrix when the adept is through with it."

"Huh?"

"Like a flame. A flame exists only potentially till someone lights a fire, and goes back to merely potential existence when you put the fire out. And of course the second fire you light, even on the same log, is not identical with the first, so you can understand why an elemental isn't exactly anxious to be dismissed. If it ever breaks loose, as this one did, it'll do its damnedest to stay in this world and to increase its own power."

"But how come it can burn a church?"

"Because it's soulless, a mere physical force. Any true individual, human or otherwise, is under certain constraints of a . . . a moral nature. A demon is allergic to holy symbols. A man who does wrong has to live with his conscience in this world and face judgment in the next. But what does a fire care? And that's all the salamander is—a glorified fire. It's bound only by the physical laws of nature and paranature."

"So how do you, uh, put it out?"

"A Hydro of corresponding mass could do it—mutual annihilation. Earth could bury it or Air withdraw from its neighborhood. Trouble is, Fire is the swiftest of them all; it can flick out of an area before any other sort of elemental can injure it. So we're left with the dismissal spell. But that has to be said in the salamander's presence, and it takes about two minutes."

"Yeh . . . and when it hears you start the words, it'll burn you down or scram. *Very* nice. What're we gonna do?"

"I don't know, chief," I said, "except it's like kissing a sheep dog." I blew hard and smacked my lips. "You got to be quick. Every fire the critter starts feeds it more energy and makes it that much stronger. There's a critical point somewhere at which it becomes too powerful for anything to affect it."

"And then what happens?"

"Ragnarok."

I saw Ginny turn from the desk. Abercrombie was chalking a pentagram on the floor while a sputtering Malzius had been deputized to sterilize a pocket knife with a

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match—blood is a substitute for the usual powders, since it has the same proteins. The girl laid a hand on mine. "Steve, it'll take too long to get hold of all the local adepts and organize them," she said. "God knows what the salamander will be doing meanwhile. Are you game to track it down?"

"Sure," I agreed. "It can't hurt me—if I'm careful—till it gets big enough to burn up all the world's oxygen. But you're staying here!"

"Ever hear about the oath of my order? Come on."

As we went out the door, I gave Abercrombie a smug look. He had nicked his wrist and sprinkled the Signs; now he was well into the invocation. I felt cold dampness swirl through the room.

Outside, the night was still autumnally sharp, the moon high. Roofs were a sawtoothed silhouette against the leaping red glare at a dozen points around us, and sirens howled in the streets. Up overhead, across the small indifferent stars, I saw what looked like the whirl of dry leaves, refugees fleeing on their sticks.

Svartalf jumped to the front end of Ginny's Cadillac, and I took the saddle behind. We rode skyward.

Below us, blue fire spat and the station lights went out. Water poured into the street, a solid roar of it with President Malzius bobbing like a cork in the torrent.

"Unholy Sathanas!" I choked. "What's happened now?"

Svartalf ducked the stick low. "That idiot," groaned Ginny. "He let the Hydro slop all over the floor . . . short circuits . . ." She made a few rapid passes with her wand. The stream quieted, drew into herself, became a ten-foot high blob glimmering in the moonlight. Abercrombie scuttled out and started it squelching toward the nearest fire.

I laughed. "Go on up to his place and listen to him tell about his vast experience," I said.

"Don't kick a man when he's down," Ginny snapped. "You've pulled your share of boners, Steve Matuchek."

Svartalf whisked the broom up again and we went low above the chimneypots. *Oof!* I thought. Could she really be falling for that troll? A regular profile, a smooth tongue, and proximity . . . I bit back an inward sickness and squinted ahead, trying to find the salamander.

"There!" Ginny yelled it over the whistle of cloven air. Svartalf bottled his tail and hissed.

The University district is shabby-genteel: old pseudo-Gothic caves of wood which have slipped from mansions to rooming houses, fly-specked with minor business establishments. It was burning merrily, a score of angry red stars flickering in the darkness between street lamps. As I watched, one of the stars exploded in a puff of steam

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—the Hydro must have clapped a sucker onto a fireplug and blanketed the place. I had a brief heretical thought that the salamander was doing a public service by eliminating those architectural teratologies . . . but of course lives and property were involved—

Tall and terrible, the elemental wavered beside the house on which it was feeding. It had doubled in size, and its core was too bright to look at. Flames whirled about the reptile head.

Svartalf braked and we hovered a few yards off, twenty feet in the air and level with the hungry mouth. Ginny was etched wild against night by that intolerable radiance. She braced herself in the stirrups and began the spell, her voice almost lost in the roar as the roof caved in. *"O Indra, Abaddon, Lucifer, Moloch, Hephaestos, Loki . . ."*

It heard. The seething eyes swung toward us and it leaped.

Svartalf squalled as his whiskers shriveled—perhaps it was only hurt vanity—and put the stick through an Immelmann turn and whipped away. The salamander bawled with the voice of a hundred blazing forests. Suddenly the heat scorching my back was gone, and the thing had materialized in front of us.

"That way!" I hollered, pointing. "In there!"

I covered Ginny's eyes and buried my own face against her back as we went through the plate-glass front of Stub's Beer Garden. The flame-tongue licked after us, recoiled, and the salamander ramped beyond the door.

We tumbled off the broom and looked around. The place was empty, full of a fire-spattered darkness. Everyone had fled. I saw a nearly full glass of beer on the counter and tossed it off.

"You might have offered me a drink," said Ginny. "Alan would have." Before I could recover enough to decide whether she was taunting or teasing me, she went on in a rapid whisper: "It isn't trying to escape. It's gained power—confidence—it means to kill us!"

Even then, I wanted to tell her that tousled red hair and a soot-smudge across an aristocratic nose were particularly enchanting. But the occasion didn't seem appropriate. "Can't get in here," I panted. "Can't do much more than ignite the building by thermal radiation, and that'll take a while. We're safe for the moment."

"Why . . . oh, yes, of course. Stub's is cold-ironed. All these college beer parlors are, I'm told."

"Yeh." I peered out the broken window. The salamander peered back, and spots danced before my eyes. "So the clientele won't go jazzing up the brew above 3.2—Quick, say your spell."

Ginny shook her head. "It'll just flicker away out of earshot. Maybe we can talk to it, find out—"

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She trod forth to the window, and the thing crouched in the street extended its neck and hissed at her. I stood behind my girl, feeling boxed and useless. Svartalf, lapping spilled beer off the counter, looked up and sneered.

"Ohé, Child of Light!" she cried.

A ripple went down the salamander's back. Its tail switched restlessly, and a tree across the way kindled. I can't describe the voice that answered . . . crackling, bellowing, sibilant, it was Fire given a brain and a throat. "Daughter of Eve, what have you to say to the likes of Me?"

"I command you by the Most High, return to your proper bonds and cease from troubling the world."

"Ho—oh, ho, ho, ho!" The thing sat back on its haunches (asphalt bubbled) and shuddered its laughter into the sky. "*You* command Me, combustible one?"

"I have at my beck powers so mighty they could wither your little spark into the nothingness whence it came. Cease and obey, lest worse befall you than dismissal."

I think the salamander was, for a moment, honestly surprised. "Greater than *Me?*" Then it howled so the tavern shook. "You dare say there are mightier forces than Fire? Than Me, Who am going to consume all the earth?"

"Mightier and more beautiful, O Ashmaker. Think—you cannot even enter this house. Water will extinguish you, Earth will smother you, Air alone can keep you alive. Best you surrender now—"

I remembered the night we had faced an afreet together. Ginny must be pulling the same trick—feeling out the psychology of the thing that raged and flared beyond the door—but what could she hope to gain?

"More beautiful!" The salamander's tail beat furrows in the street. It threw out bursting fireballs and a rain of sparks, red, blue, yellow, a one-being Fourth of July. I thought crazily of a child kicking the floor in a tantrum.

"More beautiful! Stronger! You dare say—Haaaaa—" Teeth of incandescence gleamed in a mouth that was jumping fire. "We shall see how beautiful you are when you lie a choked corpse!" Its head darted to the broken glass front. It could not pass the barrier of cold iron, but it began to suck air, in and out. A furnace wave of heat sent me gasping back.

"My God . . . it's going to use up all our oxygen. . . . Stay here!" Hardly thinking, I sprang for the door. Ginny shrieked, but I scarcely heard her "No!" as I went through.

Moonlight flooded me, cool and tingling between the unrestful guttering fires. I crouched to the hot sidewalk and felt a shudder as my body changed.

Wolf I was, and a wolf which

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only silver could kill . . . I hoped. My abbreviated tail thrust against the seat of my pants, and I remembered that some injuries are beyond the healing powers of even the were shape.

Pants! Hell and damnation! Have you ever tried being a wolf while wrapped in shirt, trousers, underwear, and topcoat designed for a man?

I went flat on my moist black nose. My suspenders slid down and wrapped themselves about my hind legs. My tie tripped me up in front and my coat gleefully wrapped itself around the whole bundle.

Frantic, I snapped at the cloth, rolling over and tearing with my fangs. The salamander grew aware of me, and its tail slapped contemptuously across my back. For a moment of searing agony, hair and skin went up with the fabric . . . then I was free, and the fluid molecules rebuilt themselves. Hardly knowing what I did, I picked up a shoe which had dropped from my now smaller foot, laid it on the salamander's white-hot toe, and bore down.

It roared and swung about to attack me. Those jaws gaped wide enough to bite me in half. I skittered away. It paused, gauged the distance, flicked into nothingness, and materialized right on top of me.

I *think* I got a tooth-grip in the obvious place to bite a salamander when it is sitting on you, but the pain was too great for me to know. Then it was gone, the street lay bare and quiet between burning houses, and I gasped my way back toward wholeness.

Sanity returned. My shaggy head was in Ginny's lap, and she was stroking it and crying. Feebly, I licked her hand. Strength flowed back. As a man, I'd naturally have stayed where I was, but being a wolf with lupine instincts, I sat up and yipped.

"Steve . . . Almighty Father, Steve, you saved our lives," whispered Ginny. "Another minute and we'd have been suffocating. My lungs still feel like mummy dust."

Svartalf trotted from the bar, looking as smug as a cat with singed whiskers can. He meowed. Ginny gave a trembling laugh and explained:

"But you owe Svartalf a pint of cream or something. He saved you too. A few more seconds and you'd have been dead—but he showed me how to drive the beast off."

I cocked my ears inquiringly.

"He manned the beer taps," she said. "I filled stein after stein and went out and threw them at the salamander. Not enough to do more than discommode it . . . but added to the trouble you were making, enough to make it skip."

Horrible waste of beer, I thought. But there was still work to do.

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Penalties attach to everything. The trouble with being were is that in the other shape you have, essentially, an animal brain, with only a superficial layer of human personality. Or in plain language, as a wolf I'm a rather stupid man. I was only able to think I'd better reassume human form . . . and I did.

Ever see a cat grin? "Omigawd!" I groaned, and started to change back.

"Never mind that," said Ginny crisply, peeling off her fur coat. I broke all records donning it. Pretty tight fit around the shoulders, but it went low enough . . . if I was careful. The night wind nipped my shanks, but my face was of salamander temperature.

"Now where?" I asked quickly. "The damned critter could be anyplace."

"I think it will hang around the campus," she said. "Plenty of grazing, and it's not very smart. Let's get back on our stick."

She fetched it from the smoldering barroom and we lifted. "All we've done so far," I said, "is lose time."

"No, not entirely. I did get a line on its mind." Ginny turned her head back to face me as we cleared the rooftops. "I wasn't sure into just what form it had been conjured—you can mold the elemental forces into almost anything. But apparently the cheerleader was satisfied to give it a knowledge of English and a rudimentary intelligence. Add to that the volatile nature of Fire, and what have you got? A child."

"Some child," I muttered, hugging her coat to me.

"No, no, Steve, this is important. It has all the child's traits. Improvidence, complete lack of foresight . . . a wise salamander would lie low, gathering strength slowly, and would never think of burning the entire planet. Because what would it use for oxygen when that was finished? You'll note, too, its fantastic vanity; it went into an insane rage when I said there were powers stronger and more beautiful than it, and the crack about beauty hurt as much as the one about strength. Short span of attention . . . it could have smothered us easily before attending to as minor a nuisance as you provided. At the same time, within that span of attention, it focuses on one issue only, to the exclusion of everything else." She nodded thoughtfully, and the long blowing hair tickled my face. "I don't know just how, but some way its psychology must provide us with a lever."

My own vanity is not small. "I wasn't such a minor nuisance," I grumbled.

Ginny smiled and reached around to pat my cheek. "All right, Steve, all right. I love you just the same, and now I *know* you'll make a good husband."

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That left me in a comfortable glow until I wondered precisely what she was thinking of.

We spotted the salamander below us, igniting a theater, but it flicked away even as I watched, and a mile off it appeared next to the medical research center. Glass brick doesn't burn very well. As we neared, I saw it petulantly kick the wall and vanish again. Ignorant and impulsive . . . a child . . . a brat from Hell!

Sweeping over the campus, we saw lights in the Administration Building. "Probably that's HQ for our side now," said Ginny. "We'd better report." Svartalf landed us on the Mall in front of the place and strutted ahead toward the steps.

A squad of cops armed with fire extinguishers guarded the door. "Hey, there!" One of them barred our path. "Where you going?"

"To the meeting," said Ginny, smoothing her tangled hair.

"Yeh?" The policeman's eye fell on me. "All dressed up for it, too, aren't you? Haw, haw, haw!"

I'd had about enough for one night. I wered and peeled off his own trousers. As he lifted his billy, Ginny turned it into a small boa constrictor. I switched back to human, we left the squad to its own problems and went down the hall.

The faculty meeting room was packed. Malzius had summoned all his professors. As we entered, I heard his orotund tones: ". . . disgraceful. The authorities won't even listen to me. Gentlemen, it is for us to vindicate the honor of Gown against Town." He blinked when Ginny and Svartalf came in, and turned a beautiful Tyrian purple as I followed in the full glory of mink coat and stubby chin. "*Mister* Matuchek!"

"He's with me," said Ginny curtly. "We were out fighting the salamander while you sat here."

"Possibly something more than brawn, even lupine brawn, is required," smiled Dr. Alan Abercrombie. "I see that Mr. Matuchek lost his pants in a more than vernacular sense."

Like Malzius, he had changed his wet clothes for the inevitable tweeds. Ginny gave him a cold look. "I thought you were directing the Hydro," she said.

"Oh, we got enough adepts together to use three water elementals," he said. "Mechanic's work. I felt my job was here. We can control the fires easily enough—"

"—if the salamander weren't always lighting fresh ones," clipped Ginny. "And every blaze it starts, it gets bigger and stronger, while you sit here looking beautiful."

"Why, thank you, my dear," he laughed.

I jammed my teeth together so it hurt. She had actually smiled back at him.

"Order, order!" boomed President Malzius. "Please be seated,

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Miss Graylock. Have you anything to contribute to the discussion?"

"Yes. I understand the salamander now." She took a place at the end of the table. It was the last vacant chair, so I hovered miserably in the background wishing her coat had more buttons.

"Understand it well enough to extinguish it?" asked Professor van Linden of Alchemy.

"No. But I know how it thinks —"

"We're more interested in how it operates," said van Linden. "How can we make it hold still long enough to hear a dismissal?" He cleared his throat. "Obviously, we must first know by what process it shuttles around so fast—"

"Oh, that's simple enough," piped up little Griswold timidly. He was drowned by van Linden's fruity bass:

"—which is, of course, by the well-known affinity of Fire for Quicksilver. Since virtually every home these days has at least one thermometer—"

"With all due respect, my good sir," interrupted Vittorio of Astrology, "you are talking utter hogwash. It is a simple matter of the conjunction of Mercury and Neptune in Scorpio—"

"You're wrong, sir!" declared van Linden. "Dead wrong! Let me show you the *Ars Thaumaturgica*." He glared around after his copy, but of course it had been mislaid and he had to use an adaptation of the Dobu yam-calling chant to find it. Meanwhile Vittorio was screaming:

"No, no, no! The conjunction, with Uranus opposing in the ascendant, as I can easily prove—" He went to the blackboard and started drawing a diagram.

"Oh, come now!" snorted Jasper of Metaphysics. "I don't understand how you can both be so wrong. As I showed in my paper read at the last A.A.A.S. meeting, the intrinsic nature—"

"That was disproved ten years ago!" roared van Linden. "The affinity—"

"*—Ding an sich—*"

"—up Uranus—"

I sidled over and tugged at Griswold's sleeve. He pattered into a corner with me. "Just how *does* the bloody thing work?" I asked.

"Oh . . . merely a question of wave mechanics." he whispered. "According to the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, a photon has a finite probability of being at any point of space. The salamander uses a simple diffraction process to change the spatial coordinates of psi squared, in effect going from point to point without crossing the intervening space, much like an electron making a quantum jump, though of course the analogy is not precise due to the modifying influence of—"

"Never mind," I sighed. "This confab is becoming a riot. Wouldn't we do better to—"

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"—stick by the original purpose," agreed Abercrombie, joining us. Ginny followed. Van Linden blacked Vittorio's eye while Jasper threw chalk at both of them. Our little group went over near the door.

"I've already found the answer to our problem," said Abercrombie, "but I'll need help. A transformation spell—turn the salamander into something we can handle more easily."

"That's dangerous," said Ginny. "You'll need a really strong T-spell, and that sort can backfire. Just what happens then is unpredictable."

Abercrombie straightened himself with a look of pained nobility. "For you, my dear, no hazard is too great."

She regarded him with admiration. It does take guts to use the ultimate runes. "Let's go," she said. "I'll help."

Griswold plucked at my arm. "I don't like this, Mr. Matuchek," he confided. "The Art is too unreliable. There ought to be some method grounded in nature and nature's quantitative laws."

"Yeh," I said disconsolately. "But what?" I paddled out after Ginny and Abercrombie, who had their heads together over the handbook. Griswold marched beside me and Svartalf made a gesture with his tail at the Trismegistus faculty. They were too embroiled to notice.

We went out past an enraged but well-cowed squad of cops. The Physical Sciences hall was nearby, and its chemistry division held stuff that would be needed. We entered an echoing gloom.

The freshman lab, a long room full of workbenches, shelves, and silence, was our goal. Griswold switched on the lights and Abercrombie looked around. "But we'll have to bring the salamander here," he said. "We can't do anything except in its actual presence."

"Go ahead and make ready," the girl told him. "I know how to fetch the beast. A minor transformation—" She laid out some test tubes, filled them with various powders, and sketched her symbols on the floor. Those ball-point wands are useful.

"What's the idea?" I asked.

"Oh, get out of the way," she snapped. I told myself she was only striking at her own weariness and despair, but it hurt. "We'll use its vanity, of course. I'll prepare some Roman candles and rockets and stuff—shoot them off, and naturally it'll come to show it can do more spectacular things."

Griswold and I withdrew into a corner. This was big-league play. I was frankly scared, and the little scientist's bony knees were beating a tattoo in march time. Even Ginny —yes, there was sweat beading that smooth forehead. If this didn't work, we were probably all done for: either the salamander or the backlash of the spell could finish us.

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And we had no way of knowing whether the beast had grown too strong for a transformation.

The witch got her fireworks prepared, and went to an open window and leaned out. Hissing balls of blue and red, streamers of golden sparks, flew up and exploded.

Abercrombie had completed his diagrams. He turned to smile at us. "It's all right," he said. "Everything under control. I'm going to turn the salamander's energy into matter. *E* equals *mc* squared, you know. Just light me a Bunsen burner, Matuchek, and set a beaker of water over it. Griswold, you turn off these lights and use the polaroid bulbs. We need polarized radiation."

We obeyed—and I hated to see an old and distinguished man acting as lab assistant to this patronizing slickpaper adman's dream. "You *sure* it'll work?" I asked.

"Of course," he smiled. "I've had experience. I was in the Quartermaster Corps during the war, till they tapped me for the propaganda division . . . broadcasting nightmares, you know."

"Yeh," I said, "but turning dirt into K-rations isn't the same thing as transforming that hell-born monster. You and your experience!"

Suddenly and sickly, remembering how he had bungled with the Hydro, I realized the truth. Abercrombie was confident, unafraid—because he didn't *know* enough!

For a minute I couldn't unfreeze my muscles. Griswold stood fiddling unhappily with some metallic samples. He'd been using them only the other day for freshman experiments, trying to teach us the chemical properties—Lord, it seemed a million years ago . . .

"Ginny!" I stumbled toward her where she stood at the window throwing rainbows into the air. "My God, darling, stop—"

Crack! The salamander was in the room with us.

I lurched back from it, half blinded. Grown hideously bigger, it filled the other end of the lab, and the bench tops smoked.

"Oh, so!" The voice of Fire blasted our eardrums. Svartalf shot up to a shelf top and began upsetting bottles of acid onto the varmint. It didn't notice. "So, small moist pests, you would try to outdo Me!"

Abercrombie and Ginny lifted their wands and shouted the few brief words of transformation.

Crouched back into my corner, peering through a sulfurous reek of fumes, I saw Ginny cringe and then jump for safety. She must have sensed the backlash. There was a shattering explosion and the air was full of flying glass.

My body shielded Griswold, and the spell didn't do more to me than turn me lupine. I saw Ginny nearby on her hands and knees, behind a bench, half unconscious . . . but unhurt, unhurt, praise all Powers forever. Svartalf—a Pekingese dog

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yapped on the shelf. Abercrombie was gone, but a chimpanzee in baggy tweeds scuttered wailing toward the door.

A fire-blast rushed before the ape. He whirled, screamed, and shinnied up a steam pipe. The salamander arched its back and howled with laughter.

"You would use your tricks on Me? Almighty Me, terrible Me, beautiful Me? Ha, they bounce off like water from a hot skillet! And I, I, I am the skillet which is going to fry you!"

Somehow, the low-grade melodrama of its speech was not at all ridiculous. For this was the childish, vainglorious, senselessly consuming thing which was loose on earth to turn our broad fair home into one white blaze among the planets.

Under the polaroids, I switched back to human and stood up behind the bench. Griswold turned on a water faucet and squirted a jet with his finger. The salamander hissed in annoyance—yes, water still hurt, but there wasn't enough liquid here to quench it, you'd need a whole lake by this time. . . . It swung its head, gape-mouthed, and aimed at Griswold and drew a long breath.

All is vanity. . . .

I reeled over to the Bunsen burner that was heating a futile beaker of water. Ginny sat up and looked at me through scorched locks. The room shimmered in heat, my lungs were one great anguish. I didn't have any flash of genius, I acted on raw instinct and tumbled memories.

"Kill us," I croaked. "Kill us if you dare. Our servant is more powerful than you. He'll hound you to the ends of creation."

"Your servant?" Flame wreathed the words.

"Yeh . . . I mean yes . . . our servant, that Fire which fears not water!"

The salamander stepped back a pace, snarling. It was still not so strong that the very name of water didn't make it flinch. "Show Me!" it chattered. "Show Me! I dare you!"

"Our servant . . . small, but powerful," I rasped. "Brighter and more beautiful than you, and above taking harm from the Wet Element." I staggered to the jars of metal samples and got a pair of tongs. "Have you the courage to look on him?"

The salamander bristled. "Have I the *courage?* Ask rather, does it dare confront Me?"

I flicked a glance from the corner of my eye. Ginny had risen and was gripping her wand. She scarcely breathed, but her eyes were narrowed.

There was a silence. It hung like a world's weight in that long room, smothering what noises remained: the crackle of fire, Abercrombie's simian gibber, Svartalf's indignant yapping. I took a strip of magnesi-

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um in the tongs and held it to the burner flame.

It burst into a blue-white actinic radiance from which I turned dazzled eyes. The salamander was not so viciously brilliant. I saw the brute accomplish the feat of simultaneously puffing itself up and shrinking back.

"Behold!" I lifted the burning strip. Behind me, Ginny's rapid mutter came: *"O Indra, Abaddon, Lucifer . . ."*

The child mind, incapable of considering more than one thing at a time . . . but for how long a time? I had to hold its full attention for the hundred and twenty seconds required.

"Fire," said the salamander feverishly. "Only another fire, only a little piece of that Force from which I came."

"Can you do this, buster?"

I plunged the strip into the beaker. Steam puffed from the water, it boiled and bubbled—and the metal went on burning!

". . . abire ex orbis terrestris . . ."

"Mg plus H_2O yields MgO plus H_2," whispered Griswold reverently.

"Keek-eek!" said Abercrombie.

"Yip-yip-yip!" said Svartalf.

"It's a trick!" screamed the salamander. "It's impossible! If even I cannot—*No!*"

"Stay where you are!" I barked in my best Army manner. "Do you doubt that my servant can follow you where you may flee?"

"I'll kill that little monster!"

"Go right ahead, chum," I agreed. "Want to have the duel fought under the sea?"

Whistles skirled above the racketing fire. The police had seen through our windows.

"I'll show you, I will!" There was almost a sob in the roar. I ducked behind the bench, pulling Griswold with me, as a geyser of flame rushed where I had been.

"Nyaah, nyaah, nyaah," I called. "You can't catch me! Scaredy cat!"

Svartalf gave me a hard look.

The floor trembled as the elemental came toward me, not going around the benches but burning its way through them. Heat clawed at my throat, I spun down toward darkness.

And it was gone. Ginny cried her triumphant *"Amen!"* and displaced air cracked like thunder.

I lurched to my feet. Ginny fell into my arms. The police entered the lab and Griswold hollered something about calling the fire department before his whole building went up in smoke. Abercrombie scampered out a window and Svartalf jumped down from the shelf. He forgot that a Pekingese isn't as agile as a cat, and his pop eyes bubbled with righteous wrath.

Outside, the Mall was cool and still. We sat on dewed grass and looked at the moon and thought what a great and simple wonder it is to be alive.

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The geas held us apart, but tenderness lay on Ginny's lips. We scarcely noticed when somebody ran past us shouting that the salamander was gone, nor when church bells began pealing the news to all men.

Svartalf finally roused us with his barking. Ginny chuckled. "Poor fellow. I'll change you back as soon as I can, but there's more urgent business now. Come on, Steve."

Griswold, assured that his priceless hall was safe, followed us at a tactful distance. Svartalf merely sat where he was . . . too shocked to move, I guess, at the idea that there could be more important affairs than turning him back into a cat.

Dr. Malzius met us halfway, under one of the campus elms. Moonlight spattered his face and gleamed on the pince-nez. "My dear Miss Graylock," he began, "is it indeed true that you have overcome that menace to society? Most noteworthy. Accept my congratulations. The glorious annals of this great institution of which I have the honor to be president—"

Ginny faced him, arms akimbo, and nailed him with the chilliest gaze I have ever seen. "The credit belongs to Mr. Matuchek and Dr. Griswold," she said. "I shall so inform the press. Doubtless you'll then see fit to recommend a larger appropriation for Dr. Griswold's outstanding work."

"Oh, now, really," stammered the scientist. "I didn't—"

"Be quiet, you ninnyhammer," hissed Ginny. Aloud: "Only through his courageous and farsighted adherence to the basic teachings of natural law—Well, you can fill in the rest for yourself, Malzius. I don't think you'd be very popular if you went on starving his department."

"Oh . . . indeed . . . after all . . ." The president blew himself up. "I have given careful consideration to the matter. Was going to recommend it at the next meeting of the board, in fact."

"I'll hold you to that," said Ginny. "Now there is this stupid rule against student-faculty relationships. Mr. Matuchek is shortly going to be my husband—"

Whoosh! I tried to regain my breath.

"My dear Miss Graylock," sputtered Malzius, "decorum . . . propriety . . . why, he isn't even decent!"

I realized with horror that somehow, in all the excitement, I'd lost Ginny's expensive mink coat.

A pair of cops approached, dragging a small hairy form that struggled in their arms. One of them carried the garments the chimp had shed. "Begging your pardon, Miss Graylock." The tone was pure worship. "We found this monkey loose and—"

"Oh, yes." She laughed. "We'll have to restore him. But not right

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away. Steve needs those pants worse."

I got into them in a hurry. Ginny turned back to smile with angelic sweetness at Malzius.

"Poor Dr. Abercrombie," she sighed. "These things will happen when you deal with paranatural forces. Now I believe, sir, that there is no rule against faculty members conducting research."

"Oh, no," said the president shakily. "Of course not. On the contrary! We expect our people to publish—"

"To be sure. Now I have in mind a most interesting research project involving transformations. I'll admit it's just the least bit dangerous. It could backfire as Dr. Abercrombie's spell did." Ginny leaned on her wand and regarded the turf thoughtfully. "It could even . . . yes, there's even a small possibility that it could turn *you* into an ape, dear Dr. Malzius. Or, perhaps, a worm. A long slimy one. But we mustn't let that stand in the way of Science, must we?"

"What? But—"

"Naturally," purred the witch, "if I were allowed to conduct myself as I wish with my fiancé, I shouldn't have time for research."

It took Malzius a bare fifty words to admit surrender. He stumped off in tottery grandeur while the last fire-glow died above the campus roofs.

Ginny gave me a long slow glance. "The rule can't officially be stricken till tomorrow," she murmured. "Think you can cut a few classes then?"

"Keek-eek-eek," said Dr. Alan Abercrombie. Then Svartalf showed up full of resentment and chased him up the tree.

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Every time I have read this story, in the course of its purchase and preparation, I have found new levels of meaning in it: and I'm wholly uncertain how it should be introduced. Let's just say that it is a ghostless Christmas story far more terrifying than anything ever written in the Christmas-Ghost tradition: that it's completely different in tone from anything else Mildred Clingerman has done: and that only she, with her warmth and love and understanding, could have created such chill horror.

The Wild Wood

by MILDRED CLINGERMAN

IT SEEMED TO MARGARET ABBOTT that her children, as they grew older, clung more and more jealously to the family Christmas traditions. Her casual suggestion that, just this once, they try something new in the way of a Christmas tree met with such teen-age scorn and genuine alarm that Margaret hastily abandoned the idea. She found it wryly amusing that the body of ritual she herself had built painstakingly through the years should now have achieved sacrosanctity. Once again, then, she would have to endure the secret malaise of shopping for the tree at Cravolini's Christmas Tree Headquarters. She tried to comfort herself with the thought that one wretchedly disquieting hour every year was not too much to pay for her children's happiness. After all, the episode always came far enough in advance of Christmas so that it never *quite* spoiled the great day for her.

Buying the tree at Cravolini's began the year Bonnie was four. Bruce had been only a toddler, fat and wriggling, and so difficult for Margaret to carry that Don had finally loaded Margaret with the packages and perched his son on his shoulder. Margaret remembered that night clearly. All day the Abbotts had promised Bonnie that when evening came, when all the shop lights blazed inside the fairy-tale windows, the four of them would stroll the crowded streets, stopping or moving on at Bonnie's command. At some point along the way, the parents privately assured each other, Bonnie would grow tired and fretful but unwilling to relinquish the dazzling street and her moment of

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power. That would be the time to allow her to choose the all-important tree, which must then, of course, be carried to their car in triumph with Bonnie as valiant, proud helper. Once she had been lured to the car it would be simple to hurry her homeward and to bed. The fragrant green mystery of the tree, sharing their long ride home, would insure her sleepiness and contentment.

As it turned out (why hadn't they foreseen it?), the child showed no sign of fatigue that evening other than her captious rejection of every Christmas tree pointed out to her. Margaret, whose feet and back ached with Bruce's weight, swallowed her impatience and shook out yet another small tree and twirled its dark bushiness before Bonnie's cool, measuring gaze.

"No," Bonnie said. "It's too little. Daddy, let's go that way." She pointed down one of the darker streets, leading to the area of pawnshops and narrow little cubbyholes that displayed cheap jewelry. These, in turn, verged on the ugly blocks that held credit clothiers, shoe repair shops, and empty, boarded-up buildings where refuse gathered ankle-deep in the entrance ways.

"I won't," Margaret said. "This is silly. What's the matter with this tree, Bonnie? It isn't so small. We certainly aren't going to wander off down there. I assure you, they don't *have* Christmas trees on that street, do they, Don?"

Don Abbott shook his head, but he was smiling down at his daughter, allowing her to drag him to the street crossing.

Like a damn, lumbering St. Bernard dog, Margaret thought, *towed along by a simpering chee-ild.* She stared after her husband and child as if they were strangers. They were waiting for her at the corner, Don, with the uneasy, sheepish look of a man who knows his wife is angry but unlikely to make a scene. Bonnie was still tugging at his hand, flashing sweet, smug little smiles at her mother. Margaret dropped the unfurled tree with a furious, open-fingered gesture, shifted Bruce so that he rode on one hip, and joined them.

The traffic light changed and they all crossed together. Don slowed and turned a propitiating face to his wife. "You all right, hon? Here, you carry the packages and I'll take Bruce. If you want to, you could go sit in the car. Bonnie and I, we'll just check down this street a little way to make sure. . . . She says they've got some big trees someplace down here." He looked doubtfully down at his daughter then. "Are you sure, Bonnie? How do you know?"

"I saw them. Come on, Daddy."

"Probably she *did* see some," Don said. "Maybe last week when we drove through town. You

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know, kids see things we don't notice. Lord, with traffic the way it is, who's got time to see anything? And besides, Margaret, you said she could pick the tree. You said it was time to start building traditions, so the kids would have . . . uh . . . security and all that. Seems to me the tree won't mean much to her if we make her take the one we choose. Anyway, that's the way I figure it."

Margaret moved close to him and took his arm, squeezing it to show both her forgiveness and apology. Don smiled down at her and Margaret's whole body warmed. For a long moment she allowed her eyes to challenge his with the increased moisture and blood-heat that he called "smoky," and which denoted for both of them her frank desire. He stared back at her with alerted male tension, and then consciously relaxed.

"Well, not right here and now," he said. "See me later."

Margaret, reassured, skipped a few steps. This delighted the children. The four of them were laughing, then, when they found themselves in front of the derelict store that housed Cravolini's Christmas Tree Headquarters.

Perhaps it was their gaiety, that first year, that made Cravolini's such a pleasant memory for Don and the children. For the first few minutes Margaret, too, had found the dim, barny place charming. It held a bewildering forest of upright trees, aisles and aisles of them, and the odor of fir and spruce and pine was a tingling pleasure to the senses. The floor was covered with damp sawdust, the stained old walls hung with holly wreaths and Della Robbia creations that showed real artistry. Bonnie had gone whooping off in the direction of the taller trees, disappearing from sight so quickly that Don had hurried after her, leaving Margaret standing just inside the door.

She found herself suddenly struggling with that queer and elusive conviction that "this has happened before." Not since her own childhood had she felt so strongly that she was capable of predicting in detail the events that would follow this moment. Already her flesh prickled with foreknowledge of the touch that would come . . . *now*.

She whirled to stare into the inky eyes of the man who stood beside her, his hand poised lightly on her bare forearm. Yes, he was part of the dream she'd returned to—the long, tormenting dream in which she cried out for wholeness, for decency, and love, only to have the trees close in on her, shutting away the light. "The trees, the trees . . ." Margaret murmured. The dream began to fade. She looked down across the packages she held at the dark hand that smoothed the golden hairs on her forearm. *I got those last summer when I swam so much.*

She straightened suddenly as the

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dream ended, trying to shake off the langour that held her while a strange, ugly man stroked her arm. She managed to jerk away from him, spilling the packages at her feet. He knelt with her to pick them up, his head so close to hers that she smelled his dirty, oily hair. The odor of it conjured up for her (*again?*) the small, cramped room and the bed with the thin mattress that never kept out the cold. Onions were browning in olive oil there over the gas plate. The man standing at the window with his back turned . . . *He needed her; nobody else needed her in just that way. Besides, Mama had said to watch over Alberto. How could she leave him alone? But Mama was dead. . . . And how could Mama know all the bad things Alberto had taught her?*

"Margaret." Don's voice called her rather sharply out of the dream that had again enveloped her. Margaret's sigh was like a half-sob. She laughed up at her husband, and he helped her to her feet, and gathered up the packages. The strange man was introducing himself to Don. He was Mr. Cravolini, the proprietor. He had seen that the lady was very pale, ready to faint, perhaps. He'd stepped up to assist her, unfortunately frightening her, since his step had not been heard—due, doubtless, to the great depth of the sawdust on the floor. Don, she saw, was listening to the overtones of the apology. If Mr. Cravolini's voice displayed the smallest hint of insolence and pride in the lies he was telling, then Don would grab him by the shirt front and shake him till he stopped lying and begged for mercy. Don did not believe in fighting. Often while he and Margaret lay warmly and happily in bed together Don spoke regretfully of his "wild-kid" days, glad that with maturity he need not prove on every street corner that he was not afraid to fight, glad to admit to Margaret that often he'd been scared, and always he'd been sick afterwards. Don approved of social lies, the kind that permitted people to live and work together without too much friction. So Mr. Cravolini had made a mistake. Finding Margaret alone, he'd made a pass. He knew better now. OK. Forget it. Thus Margaret read her husband's face and buried very deeply the sharp, small stab of disappointment. *A fight would have ended it, for good.* She frowned a little with the effort to understand her own chaotic thoughts, her vision of a door that had almost closed on a narrow, stifling room, but was now wedged open . . . waiting.

Don led her down one of the long aisles of trees to where Bonnie and Bruce were huddled beside their choice. Margaret scarcely glanced at the tree. Don was annoyed with her—half-convinced, as he always was, that Margaret had invited the pass. Not by any overt

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signal on her part, but simply because she forgot to look busy and preoccupied.

"Don't go dawdling along in that wide-eyed dreamy way," he'd said so often. "I don't know what it is, but you've got that look—as if you'd say yes to a square meal or to a panhandler or to somebody's bed."

Bonnie was preening herself on the tree she'd chosen, chanting a maddening little refrain that Bruce would comprehend at any moment: "And Bru-cie did-unt he-ulp. . . ." Already Bruce recognized that the singsong words meant something scornful and destructive to his dignity. His face puckered, and he drew the three long breaths that preceded his best screaming.

Margaret hoisted him up into her arms, while Don and Bonnie hastily beat a retreat with the excuse that they must pay Mr. Cravolini for the tree. Bruce screamed his fury at a world that kept trying to confine him, limit him, or otherwise squeeze his outsize ego down to puny, civilized proportions. Margaret paced up and down the aisles with him, wondering why Don and Bonnie were taking so long.

Far back at the rear of the store building, where the lights were dimmest, Margaret caught sight of a display of handmade candles. Still joggling Bruce up and down as if she were churning butter, she paused to look them over. Four pale blue candles of varying lengths rose gracefully from a flat base moulded to resemble a sheaf of laurel leaves. Very nice, and probably very expensive. Margaret turned away to find Mr. Cravolini standing immediately in front of her.

"Do you like those candles?" he asked softly.

"Where is my husband?" Margaret kept her eyes on Bruce's fine, blonde hair. *Don't let the door open any more. . . .*

"Your husband has gone to bring his car. He and your daughter. The tree is too large to carry so far. Why are you afraid?"

"I'm not afraid. . . ." She glanced fleetingly into the man's eyes, troubled again that her knowledge of his identity wavered just beyond reality. "Have we met before?" she asked.

"I almost saw you once," Cravolini said. "I was standing at a window. You were reflected in it, but when I turned around you were gone. There was nobody in the room but my sister . . . the stupid cow . . ." Cravolini spat into the sawdust. "That day I made a candle for you. Wait." He reached swiftly behind the stacked packing boxes that held the candles on display. He had placed it in her hand before she got a clear look at it. Sickeningly pink, loathsomely slick and hand-filling. It would have been cleaner, more honest, she thought, if it had been a frank reproduction of what it was intended

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to suggest. She dropped it and ran awkwardly with the baby towards the lights at the entrance way. Don was just parking the car. She wrenched the door open and half fell into the front seat. Bonnie had rushed off with Don to bring out the tree. Margaret buried her face in Bruce's warm, sweet-smelling neck and nuzzled him till he laughed aloud. She never quite remembered afterwards the ride home that night. She must have been very quiet—in one of her "lost" moods, as Don called them. The next morning she was surprised to see that Bonnie had picked one of Cravolini's largest, finest trees, and to discover the tissue-wrapped pale blue candles he had given Bonnie as a special Christmas gift.

Every year after that Margaret promised herself that this year she'd stay at home on the tree-buying night. But something always forced her to go—some errand, a last bit of shopping, or Don's stern injunctions not to be silly, that he could not handle Bonnie, Bruce, *and* the biggest tree in town. Once there, she never managed to escape Cravolini's unctuous welcome. If she sat in the car, then he came out to speak to her. Much better go inside and stick close by Don and the children. But that never quite worked, either. Somehow the three of them eluded her; she might hear their delighted shouts two aisles over, but when she hastened in their direction, she found only Cravolini waiting. She never eluded him. Sometimes on New Year's Day, when she heard so much about resolutions on radio and television, she thought that surely this year she'd tell Don at least some of the things Cravolini said to her —did to her—enough, anyway, to assure the Abbotts never going back there again. But she never did. It would be difficult to explain to Don why she'd waited so long to speak out about it. Why hadn't she told him that first night?

She could only shake her head in puzzlement and distaste for motivations that were tangled in a long, bad dream. And how could a woman of almost-forty explain and deeply explore a woman in her twenties? Even if they were the same woman, it was impossible.

When Cravolini's "opening announcement" card arrived each year, Margaret was jolted out of the peacefulness that inevitably built in her between Christmases. It was as if a torn and raw portion of her brain healed in the interim. *But the door was still invitingly wedged open, and every Christmas something tried to force her inside.* Margaret's spirit fought the assailant that seemed to accompany Mr. Cravolini (hovering there beyond the lights, flitting behind the trees), but the fighting left her weak and tired and without any words to

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help her communicate her distress. *If only Don would see,* she thought. *If there were no need for words. It ought to be like that.* . . . At such times she accused herself of indulging in Bruce's outgrown baby fury, crying out against things as they are.

Every time she saw Cravolini the dream gained in reality and continuity. He was very friendly with the Abbotts now. They were among his "oldest customers," privileged to receive his heartiest greetings along with the beautiful candles and wreaths he gave the children. Margaret had hoped this year that she could convince Bonnie and Bruce to have a different kind of tree—something modern and a little startling, perhaps, like tumbleweeds sprayed pink and mounted on a tree-shaped form. Anything. But they laughed at her bad taste, and were as horrified as if she were trying to by-pass Christmas itself.

I wonder if I'll see *her* this year, Margaret thought. Alberto's sister. She knew so much about her now —that she was dumb, but that she had acute, morbidly sensitive hearing—that once she'd heard Cravolini murmuring his lust to Margaret, because that was the time the animal-grunting, laughing sounds had come from the back of the store, there where extra trees lay stacked against the wall. Her name was Angela, and she was very gross, very fat, very ugly. Unmarriageable, Alberto said. Part of what Margaret knew of Angela came from Alberto's whispered confidences (unwanted, oh unasked for!), and the rest grew out of the dream that lived and walked with Margaret there in the crumbling building, beginning the moment she entered the door, ending only with Don's voice, calling her back to sanity and to another life.

There were self-revelatory moments in her life with Don when Margaret was able to admit to herself that the dream had power to call her back. She would like to know the ending. It was like a too-short book that left one hungry and dissatisfied. So this year she gave way to the children, to tradition, and went once again to Cravolini's.

Margaret was aware that she looked her best in the dull red velveteen suit. The double golden hoops at her ears tinkled a little when she walked and made her feel like an arrogant gypsy. She and Don had stopped at their favorite small bar for several drinks while the children finished their shopping.

Maybe it's the drinks, Margaret thought, and maybe it's the feeling that tonight, at last, I'll settle Mr. Cravolini, that makes me walk so jut-bosomed and proud. Don, already on his way with her to Cravolini's, had dropped into a department store with the mumbled excuse that always preceded his

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gift-buying for Margaret. He had urged her to go on alone, reminding her that the children might be there waiting. For once, Margaret went fearlessly, almost eagerly.

The children were not waiting, but the woman was. *Angela.* Margaret knew her instantly, just as she'd known Alberto. Angela stared up and down at Margaret and did not bother to hide her amusement, or her knowledge of Margaret's many hot, protesting encounters with her brother. Margaret started to speak, but the woman only jerked her head meaningfully towards the back of the store. Margaret did not move. The dream was beginning. *Alberto is waiting, there beyond the stacked-high Christmas trees. See the soft, springy nest he has built for you with pine boughs.* Margaret stirred uneasily and began to move down the aisle, Angela beside her.

I must go to him. He needs me. Mama said to look after Alberto. That I would win for myself a crown in Heaven . . . Did she know how unnatural a brother Alberto is? Did she know how he learned the seven powers from the old, forbidden books? And taught them to me? He shall have what he desires, and so shall I. Here, Alberto, comes the proud, silly spirit you've won . . . and listen, Don and the children are coming in the door.

Margaret found the soft, springy bed behind the stacked trees. Alberto was there, waiting. She heard Don call for her and struggled to answer, struggled desperately to rise to go to him. But she was so fat, so heavy, so ugly. . . . She heard the other woman's light, warm voice answering, heard her happy, foolish joking with the children, her mock-protestations, as always, at the enormous tree they picked. Margaret fought wildly and caught a last glimpse of the Abbotts, the four of them, and saw the dull, red suit the woman wore, heard the final, flirtatious tinkling of the golden earrings, and then they were gone.

A whole year I must wait, Margaret thought, *and maybe next year they won't come. She will see to that.*

"My sister, my love . . ." Alberto crooned at her ear.

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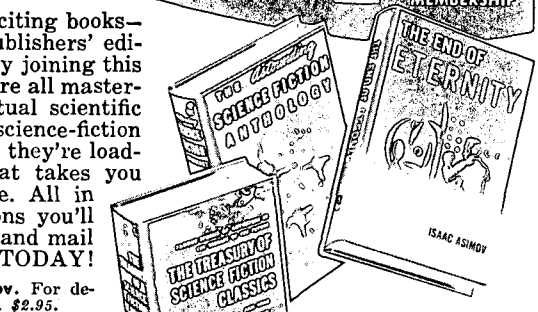

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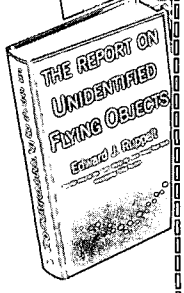

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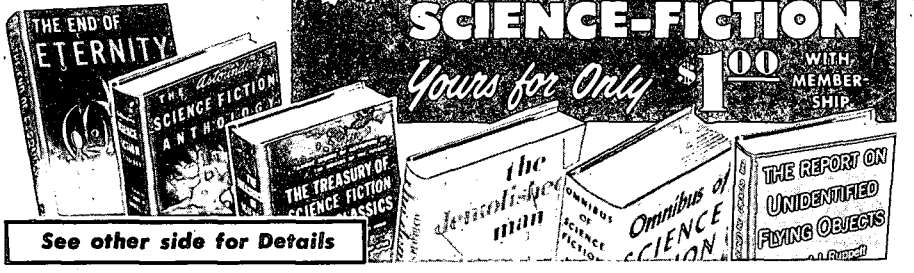
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